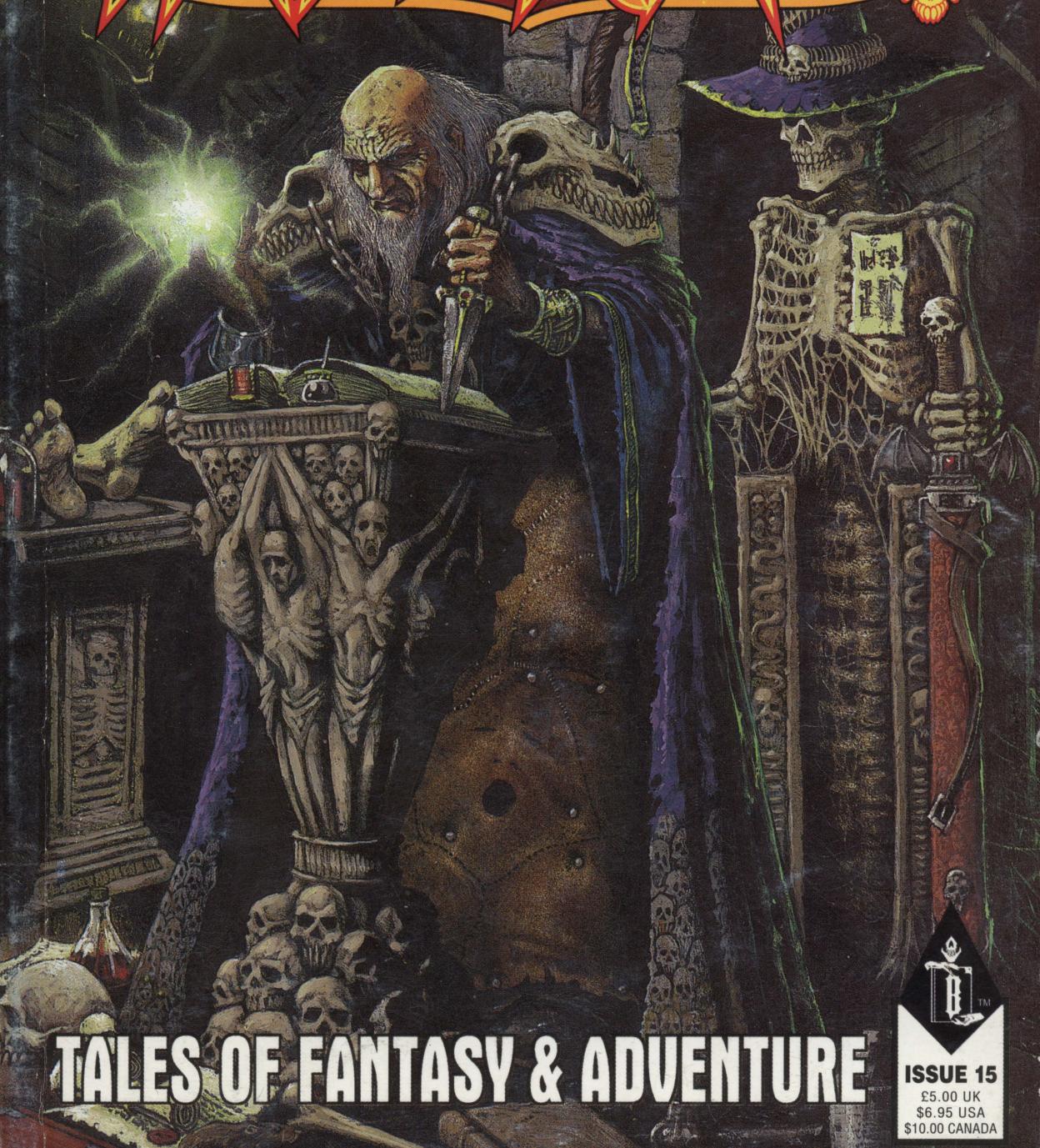


# CAVERNOS!



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**S**O HERE I am, sitting in a 45 degree heat by the rooftop pool of my hotel in Luxor, reading *Skavenslayer* and chilling out with an ice cold lager (Egyptian Stella Artois, which is another bizarre story in itself). As I chuckle with great amusement at the intricacies of Grey Seer Thanquol's latest machinations, I remember Bill King's first story in *Inferno!*, more than two and a half years ago. And now we have a string of novels steaming out to the shops. Who would have thought it, eh?

Let's cut to the chase, and it is very hot so I'm not thinking too clearly (might be the beer, I suppose). The purpose of this ramble is to reassure all *Inferno!* fans that even now we have novels coming out, *Inferno!* will continue its glorious course. Just as when we launched *Warhammer Monthly*, in fact – you still see comic strip stories in *Inferno!* too. My point is, *Inferno!* is a different beast to either comics or novels. Mmm... if comics are a cold pint of beer, and novels a stiff whisky, then *Inferno!* is a wicked cocktail of... erm, no, let's not even go there. The point is that *Inferno!* is a great mix of all sorts of story-based stuff – prose, comic strip, cutaway diagrams, illustrated features, great artwork, it's all in *Inferno!* And you can dip in and out just as you please.

Not only that, but *Inferno!* is a tremendous showcase for new talent, a wonderful

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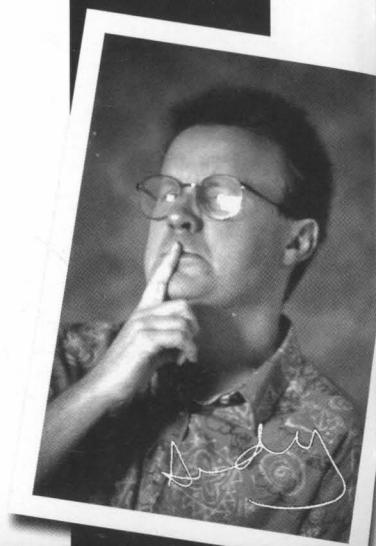
outlet for writers and artists to show us what they can do without having to create a 10-part comic series or a 300 page novel. Seriously, if you think that you can cut the mustard alongside Dan Abnett, Gordon Rennie, Kev Walker or whoever is your particular favourite, then your best bet of getting into print in the first place is in the pages of *Inferno!* And if, like Gav Thorpe, after cutting your teeth on successively better and better short stories you gain the confidence to get stuck into a novel, then great!

**T**HE FACT IS, we want new writers and artists all the time, and as long as we continue to get a stream of excellent contributions, and as long as people like you want to see them in print, then *Inferno!* will be here to stay.

Now, time for a dip, and then off to visit some more ancient tombs. Oh, there's an idea: Grunson's Marauders in Khemri? Mmm, I think I can feel a story coming on... Be afraid, be very afraid!

**Andy Jones**  
**Editor**

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**T**HE FLASK IS tubular, copper, banded with straps of dull zinc. Brother Memnes draws it from a sheath strapped to the thigh-plate of his Imperator armour.

This is the Rite of the Giving of Water, and none will look away. Nine armoured warriors, the entire assault squad, surround the kneeling Apothecary as he unscrews the stopper, then tips a few drops out onto his segmented glove. Their armour is gunmetal grey, edged with white and red, and the desert has coated them all with a film of white dust. The threads of water make stark black streaks on the dusty metal of his gauntlet's fingers. As the brothers intone the sacred rite, voices toneless as they rasp out through visor speakers, Memnes dribbles the water onto the rock he has chosen. In a second, the suns have baked it away to nothing, but the rite is nevertheless made. Water has been given, precious drops from the raging salt oceans of their homeworld, Ithaka.

They were born from a world of seas, raised from it like the great horn-plated water-wyrms they name themselves after. To them, it is the embodiment of the Emperor, who they voyage space to serve. Where ever they go, they make this offering, the life-water of Ithaka, the blood of the Emperor. This place – called Rosetta on the arcane charts shown to them at briefing – this place is now consecrated. Water has anointed this vast landscape of heat and dust.

They are the Iron Snakes. The double-looped serpent symbol stands proud upon their auto-responsive shoulder plates. They are assault team Damocles, charged with this holy duty. They stand in the ring, as Brother Memnes rises to join the circle, ten warrior-gods in the form of men, armoured and terrible. They sing, a slow ritual tune,

and beat time in deadened clanks, slapping right hands against their thigh plates.

Their weapons have been made safe for the Rite of Giving of Water, as ready weapons would be disrespectful. The chant over, they move with smooth precision, clicking sickle-pattern clips into bolt pistols. Brother Andromak connects the power feeds to his plasma gun. Blue lightning crackles into life around Brother Sergeant Raphon's lightning claw. He nods. The circle breaks.

The salt-pan glows like milk in the sunlight. Visor tints and nictitating bionic eyelids dim the glare to a bright blue translucence. The brothers are silent as they skirt the littered rocks along the edge of the depression, moving single file through the shadows.

Two suns have risen: one dull and fuzzy like an apricot, the other vast and sizzling and too white-bright for even their visors to negate. The third, a tiny spot of heat like a melta-flame, will be over the horizon in four minutes.

In line then, Brother Sergeant Raphon, Brother Andromak, Brother Priad, Brother Calignes. A break of ten paces, then in file Brother Pindor, Brother Chilles, Brother Xander, Brother Maced. Another break, then Brother Natus and Brother Apothecary Memnes. Brother Andromak carries the Chapter standard: the snake crest, double-looped, pinioned above his shoulderblades.

No words are spoken or needed. Visor arrays are matched by sharp senses. Ranges are judged and logged; terrain is assessed and scanned. Brother Sergeant Raphon uses his auspex to watch ahead. They know why they are here and what they must do. And when they must do it.

A low wind rises in the east, shivering across the pan. It picks up salt-dust as it

# BLACK GOLD

By Dan Abnett

goes, brushing the fine white powder into eddying cones. The dust seethes, flicking like foam off rock outcrops or churning in lines across the flat. The dust ripples look like snakes, Brother Priad thinks. And like breaking waves on the rock. He smiles at Brother Calignes. A good portent.

At the head of the snake of men, Brother Sergeant Raphon sees it too. He knows the dust has been stirred up by a solar wind, precursor of the third sunrise. The third sun is small, but its radioactive force on Rosetta is fiercely powerful. Triple dawn is almost upon them.

With a gesture of his hand, he double times them. They crunch on through the indigo shadows of scattered white rocks, bleached like teeth. The Iron Snakes pass into a canyon, starkly black and white with its division of shadow and light.

Shadow and light. The key to this.

Beyond, below, in a dimpled basin scoured from the pan, lies the target. Raphon sees it for the first time. Rosetta Excelsis Refinery Nine: a ten kilometre-square edifice of riveted black metal and orange pipe-work, looking like a wasp crushed into the desert by a great heel. Oily girder-work laces the structures and pouting, soot-mouthed stacks vent dark fumes and the occasional flame-bellied belch of smoke into the crystal-blue desert sky. Raphon looks at it for a while – a few seconds probably, but for him an eternity of contemplation. He knows, for he has been told, that this is a vital facility, sucking black fluid out of the porous rock buried deep beneath the salt-pan. Ten weeks ago, the pipelines that run from here to the cargo port at Alpha Rosetta sputtered dry. The precious supply of fuel had been staunched. Without its flow, the armoured battalions of the Imperial Guard on half a dozen neighbouring worlds had ground to a halt.

Raphon opens his intercom, selecting the command channel. 'Damocles, I witness to you the target. We will begin on my word.'

Liberate, they were ordered. Brother Librarian Petrok, great Petrok himself, had given the briefing. Liberate the facility and the fuel supply. Exterminate any who oppose.

Such simplicity. Raphon smiles again, feeling the hungry weight of his bolter in

his right fist, the warmth of the lightning claw which encases his left.

The third sun rises. A brief and extraordinary phenomenon striates the desert salt pan. The three opposing suns, with their trio of conflicting intensities and directions, fill the stark whiteness with a startling criss-cross of shadows. The desert becomes a checkerboard of darkness and light, grey sidelong slants, fathomless pools, intersections of harsh glare as stark as snow. It is called the Risings, Raphon knows. Librarian Petrok was quite specific. At this hour, for four and three-quarter minutes, the conjunction of sunlights make a shadow maze of the landscape.

'Damocles: move!'

Their window of opportunity.

Ten armoured warriors descend the dimple-slope at a run, crossing shadow and light, lost like sifting sand in the complexity of the flickering crosslight.

Brother Raphon reaches a sloping wall of iron-buffered siding. He scales it, ripping hand-holds with his claw, sliding over the top to bring his bolter to bear.

Two men guard the parapet, two men dressed in refinery overalls augmented with sections of body armour. The backs of their tunics are marked with sprayed stencils showing the vomitous sign of Chaos, of Tzeentch. The skins of their faces are dark and nobbled, like the hides of crocodiles. They have injected fluid tars under the skin to taint it and buried metal piercing, girder rivet heads, in the flesh. A mark of honour, so Librarian Petrok said, of membership to their foul cult. They stand by their pintle-mounted storm bolter, watching the sun rise, feeling the warmth on their lumpy, black faces.

Raphon fires twice. One drops without a head; the other reels, his spine removed in an explosion of blood, gristle and bone shards.

Brother Andromak reaches another part of the perimeter. The alternating light and dark flicker of the three suns is unnerving him, but Sergeant Raphon explained how this would be to their advantage. He kicks open a shutter door and enters the gloom, squeezing the grip of his plasma gun. Things with bright eyes set in black faces look up for a second and then die, screaming.

Brother Priad leads the assault over the north wall. Frag grenades loop from his hand and scatter to a halt on the grilled deck-way. Explosions rattle the length of the wall line. Somewhere, an alarm starts to whoop.

They are in.



**P**INDOR CROSSES an open space between derricks, blasting freely.

Gaggles of the foe stumble out in confusion and then flee as they are cut down. Calignes enters a service vault by the north wall and finds three cultists struggling with the tripod of a storm bolter. He saves ammunition and butchers them with his knife.

Chilles and Xander catch a dozen of the enemy as they panic. They impose a crossfire that pulverises all. More emerge, firing back with lasguns and autocannon. A searing shot marks Xander's shoulder guard with a denting scorch. Memnes moves in around them, setting up a third part to the crossfire. Like the three suns with their inescapable shadows, the three tracing lines of their bolter-fire pummel into and explode corrupted bags of flesh. Memnes chuckles as he does the Emperor's work.

Calignes moves from bunker to bunker, slaughtering. Through one doorway, he turns to face the stained features of a screaming heathen who opens up on him with an autocannon. Thumped backwards three paces by the succession of impacts to his carapace, Calignes grunts. His bolter has been blown from his fist and his smallest finger has been vaporised. The autocannon cycles suddenly on empty, and as the cultist gropes for a reload, Calignes rushes him, exploding his head with a clap of his augmented fists.

The Iron Snakes move deeper into the facility. Between two low concrete block houses, Maced is rushed by twenty cultists who stream over him like ants, bludgeoning him with girder strips and wrenches. He laughs as he kills them, crushing necks, splintering limbs, punching his fists through bodies. His battledress now dressed with blood, he

churns through the gore into the control room and tears the cultist he finds at the primary console into two twitching pieces.

His laughter rolls through the intercom. The other Snakes rejoice in it. Raphon kills as he laughs with a shot from his bolter. Priad fires on full auto. Andromak scorches. They kill and kill again.

Something stops Chilles in his tracks. He pauses, almost thoughtful, trying to make sense of things, struggling to overcome his clinically trained battle hunger. He stands on a derrick walkway, with a good view of the control centre. He looks down.

There is a hole in his torso. A hole that passes right through him. As his legs give out, Chilles screams in rage. He was not finished. His face hits the grill deck, denting it.

They all feel his death. Through the rapport of inter-fed lifesigns, they all feel it. The Iron Snakes mourn Chilles even before he has fallen. And they see his last sight: the Chaos Marine. The hulking, pustular form of a Dark Tusk warrior, cackling over the smoking muzzle of his weapon.

Eyes wet with anger's tears, Priad turns to find another Dark Tusk mere paces from him, charging with a horrible barbed lance. Priad can smell the rot in the air, the fetid stench of corrupting matter.

A bolter is not enough to cleanse this filth. Priad bowls the primed grenade in his hand with such fury it smacks the Dark Tusk off his feet as it strikes him in the gut. He falls, almost comical, spread-eagled around the impact. Then the grenade ignites.

Priad is drenched in mauve fluid. It clogs his vents for a moment and he falls, choking with the stench. As he gags, he sees the feet beside him, the great steel-bound boots of another Dark Tusk who is standing over him, whooping and sucking with liquid laughter, about to fire.

Raphon kills it. He squeezes the trigger of his bolter until the entire sickle clip is empty and a hurricane of rounds have hammered the Chaos Marine into a heap of organic and metal wreckage wreathed in a mist of blood.

Raphon pulls the choking Priad to his feet. 'More than we thought,' he rasps.

'Is it not the way?'

'The way of killing?'

'And so... give me more, make them lethal, make the fight worth fighting.'

Raphon clips Priad on the shoulder in respect and encouragement as the younger Brother reverses the cycle of his helmet vents to expel the ichor clogging his intakes.

They turn. There is another scream. Maced is dead. Poisonous splinter barbs from some inhuman Dark Tusk gun have just blown his legs and lower torso to shreds. A dirty, toxic knife has now silenced his screaming rage.

Vengeance burns in their throats, making them as dry as the salt pan. As he strides forward with Priad, Raphon uses his auspex to judge the deployment of Damocles. The surgical precision of their strike is melted as the men turn back to avenge. The assault is hesitating.

Raphon will not allow this. Keying open his intercom again, he barks off a string of orders that redirects and fortifies the ebbing wash of his men's advance. He quotes the motivational sermons on the use and abuse of vengeance in battle that they all heard during tactical indoctrination on the Iron Snakes' fortress-moon, Karybdis.

Memnes supports him, cutting in on a sub-channel, singing the battle-dirge of Ithaka which glorifies the dead in the Emperor's name.

Raphon and Priad meet with Andromak and Xander at a railed walkway by one of the facility's well-head arrays. There is a fog of liquid oil in the air. Xander finds Maced's corpse, sprawled in pieces in the shadows of a ductway. He signals Memnes to it.

The Apothecary arrives, opening his belt pack for the reductor and the other tools of removal. Mace himself is beyond the help of Memnes's narthecium. The bright steel tongs of the reductor are already slick with Chilles's blood. With deft but reverential hands, Memnes strips open Mace's chest armour and begins to dig the flesh apart for the sacred progenoid gland. Such rare treasure, the genetic wellspring of a Space Marine's power, cannot be abandoned. He pulls it free, a glistening thing, drops it into a chrome bowl, cleans it with a spray from a sphinxator, then places it carefully into a self-locking, sterile tube. He stoppers the tube and slides it back into the rack in his

narthecium, next to the one already holding Chilles's gland. There are eight empty tubes just like them.

Bestial wails and calls reverberate the ironwork. Andromak and Xander have cornered a Dark Tusk. The exchange of fire is brief but intense. Xander takes a hit that rips a thermal waste dissipater off his backpack. In return, he puts a bolter round in through the Dark Tusk's left visor socket. As the Chaos servant falls, thrashing, Andromak roasts him slowly with his plasma cannon.



**R**APHON AND Priad skirt the vaulted bunkers a hundred metres west.

Sharp slabs of sunlight interlace long shadows thrown by the buttresses. Priad sees where the etched inscriptions on the Imperial iron facings, eulogies to the Golden Throne, have been defaced and overwritten with dripping blasphemies. He starts to repeat the dirge to soothe his mind.

Raphon silences him. Drips of something like tar soil the white sand in the sunlit openings. They think they have the Tusk, gone to ground between two pump-station units. But the pulsing machinery is fogging Raphon's auspex.

The Tusk comes on them from the rear, grabbing Raphon from behind with great armoured limbs that lock around his throat. It drives a barbed and rusted spike through his left hip. Priad turns and dives into them, so that the three sprawl, locked, armour grinding and scraping together. The Tusk is half as big again as either of them, ancient armour black and shiny like a great scarab, dressed with filthy loops of chain. Priad twists, fighting to get his bolter close to the vile thing's face.

Blood in his mouth, Raphon fights the Tusk, fights the grip, fights the pain. He writhes to give Priad a clean shot. The spike breaks. It shatters inside Raphon. He blacks out.

The Tusk gets a hand around Priad's wrist and hauls him over, but this is a mistake. It has cleared the shot. Though still gripped, Priad fires twice, the point blank shots shattering the Tusk's helmet and skull and igniting its power pack.

The blast lifts Priad and Raphon and tosses them ten paces. By the time Priad is on his feet again, they are lying in a wide pool of blood which is streaming from the spiked hole in Raphon's armour. The wound is huge. Blood drizzles out from under him, through the buckled puncture in the plating. Wordlessly, for to speak would be to scream, Raphon shudders and uncouples his lightning claw.

Priad wants to argue, but knows this is not the time or the place. He pulls off his own left gauntlet and arms himself with the claw. He plugs the power lead into a rune-shaped socket on his elbow. Gold leaf traceries etch the knuckle backs of the ancient weapon, recording its history and uses. The commander of Damocles squad has always worn the claw. Priad flexes its fingers as the electrical charge shimmers around it. On the ground, a stiffening island of metal in a lake of blood, Raphon opens his command channel and begins his eulogy, his passing over, instructing them all to answer now to Priad.

He is finishing, his voice fading, when Memnes arrives. The Apothecary clasps Raphon's naked hand once as a gesture of honour. He opens his narthecium for medical tools.

'No time,' Raphon murmurs.

Memnes scans, concurs. Raphon's pelvis is shattered and his lower abdomen is laced with metal fragments from the shattered spike-haft still impaling him. With a ship's infirmary, care, time, and bionics it would be repairable. But there is no time, and the spike was venomous. Filth and toxins permeated the Chaos Marine's weapon, plague spores that now blister and chew their way through Raphon's body. Soon he will be a tainted slab of decaying flesh. The progenitor gland too.

Memnes removes the gland. He doesn't wait for Raphon to die. Despite the pain of the extraction, Memnes believes that all Marines would rather die knowing their legacy had been saved. The surgery wounds, rending and deep, kill Raphon. They are perhaps a blessed relief from the toxic wave which sweeps over him. Another tube for the rack.

Priad opens the command channel and speaks to his men. They hail him with grim solemnity and utter devotion. Raphon will

be mourned later. Natus reports the southern perimeter secure, and Pindor and Calignes add that all opposition has ceased. In thirteen minutes they have killed three hundred and eleven of the foe, including the Dark Tusks. For the loss of three. It has been a costly victory.



**T**HE IRON SNAKES regroup at the main gantry as Memnes and Andromak torch the corpses of the foe and lay out the three dead Iron Snakes with honour and ceremony. Working from stored instructions in their helmet memories, Priad and Natus toil to re-engage the pipeline so that fuel pumping may recommence.

Calignes searches the scrappy and incomplete log entries of the refinery's control personnel. He draws Priad across and shows him what he has found: listings of anomalous core samples and petroleum spectrographs. Three months before, to the day, Rosetta Excelsis started to suck something other than oil up from the desert aquifer.

'There is something down there,' Calignes says, 'something foul and ancient that has slumbered in the oil reserves here for...' He does not finish his sentence. Time passages of that length are beyond his ability to guess or articulate.

Priad is silent, numb perhaps. Their mission here, the directives of which he has inherited and intends to carry out with loyal precision, were to recapture this valuable well-head. It was assumed that the forces of the enemy had overtaken this place to disempower the Imperial Army.

Now that is shown to be a lie, and the deployment here of the Dark Tusks to bolster the cult's troops now makes sense. There is something valuable to Chaos here. Some artefact, perhaps, some icon, some thing of power, perhaps even an entity, buried deep below in the lightless lakes of oil.

Damocles has won: won the facility, discharged their mission at great cost. And yet it has lost. They have won a place which is worthless, seized back precious Imperial

territory, only to find it now tainted and despoiled. If they had known, from orbit, they could have...

Priad pauses. He clears his mind with slow intonations of the focus chant. Disappointment is a mind-poison. So is the thought of failure or the loss of belief in either cause or purpose. Calignes knows it too and follows Priad's lead, casting out the negative senses of loss and error gnawing at him. He needs no cue or command to do this. They are Iron Snakes, Adepts Astartes. There is no failure, there is no defeat. There is only victory and death, and both are to be savoured when they come.

Priad looks around, imagining the moment when the refinery first spewed up the faint from deep below. He feels a tiny stab of pity for the workforce here, men he has helped slaughter this day. Loyal servants of the Emperor turned to the ways of Darkness by something that they began to exhume from the depths. There is no choice now. They must do what should have been done first of all.

Priad orders Natus to stop work on the reconfiguration of the pipeline pumps. He summons Pindor and Xander, and makes them assemble all the explosives they can find. They take the full complement of frag and krak grenades from each Space Marine, then search the weapons stocks of the enemy for more.

Memnes enters the gantry and Priad quietly tells him of the discovery. Memnes thumbs open the neck seals of his helmet and removes it. His scalp is shaven and beaded with sweat. He wipes a gloved hand right back across its stubbled dome, his old face dark and serious.

'Your decision is correct. You do as Raphon would have done.' Though second in the chain of command under the squad leader, the old Apothecary has seniority on his side and his assent is always noted by the leader. Memnes knows that is what Priad, a Marine barely half his age, is looking for.

'We have not failed. It is simply that the nature of the victory has changed,' Memnes says.

'I know it. We will make true victory from this spoiled triumph, and celebrate both in the Emperor's name.'

Pindor reports that the munitions are

collected. They load them into a cargo cart and push them to the well-head. Natus and Andromak take drill-weights off one of the main bores and strap the explosives into place, lashing them into mesh ore sacks.

They are half-finished when the counterattack comes: a bombardment from the east that fractures the perimeter wall and flattens two derrick towers in a frenzy of sparks and shrieking metal. Roses of fire ball and bud into the sky. Priad has signalled their egress to the east and now he countermands, asking for a western extraction. The change will add four minutes to the Thunderhawk's flight-time.

Pindor works to complete the stowage of the explosives. He is stripped down to the waist to allow him access to the cramped space under the bore-head, his armour stacked nearby. Fluid-heavy feed lines cross his naked carapace from the belt mount, held into place by flesh staples. His shoulders bear the old scars of punishment rituals carried out on Karybdis. Pindor always scored low on morning firing rites, but his expertise at close-fighting and explosives have made him indispensable. Scar tissue, puffy and pink as coral, bunches and twists as he works.

The enemy advance from the east. More long-range bombardment, and then the first signs of troops. Dark Tusks, in two assault teams, with Razorbacks in support.

Damocles have no long range weapons, nothing with reach like the Razorbacks. Resistance at this point would be futile. Priad orders midday prayers, and they circle about him, kneeling, helmets off, heads down, as he chants the litanies of devotion, the psalms of destruction and fortitude. He does it so they will not even consider the idea they have failed. No one voices such a thought. He asks each man in turn to speak a word for the fallen.

Calignes remembers Chilles, a moment of bravery on Paradis Antimony. They all nod, remembering. Xander shows a scar that would have killed him on Basalt Ignius III, but for Mace. Mace is remembered too. Natus celebrates Brother-Sergeant Raphon's tactical skill and his bravery. Andromak recalls the day Chilles slew a water-wyrm on beloved Ithaka. Naked on a rock-tower, with a sealance braced. He took the horn-hide. The polished scales

were still looped in his belt when he died. Memnes speaks well of Maced, reminding them of his brute strength against the Orkscum on Pontius One-Eleven. Chapter legend, a legend that has died today in flesh but which will live in memory. And not, Priad reminds himself fiercely, in vain.

Pindor joins them, still half-stripped, dripping sweat and oil. He kneels and tells a short, gutsy story of Raphon at the gates of Fewgal, blinded by mud and killing all the foe he could find, cursing all the while for 'a good sea-lance' to test them. Pindor draws their laughter; honest, forthright, uplifting. No hint of defeat or failure in them now.

As is should be, thinks Priad. We have won; the Snakes have won, no matter what.

'I have done the work,' Pindor tells Priad as the laughter subsides.

They help Pindor redress his armour, while Calignes cycles the rock-bore to dig and sends it down. Oil-waste flushes up around his feet like a black tide and then seeps away down through the mesh of the gantry deck.

The foe are at the gates. A tumult of voices and gunfire. Helmets in place, the seven Iron Snakes withdraw in close file down the main cargo avenue, under the shadows of lifters and skeletal cranes. They fire as they go, lacing bolt-traces and plasma fire into the buildings and niches.

At the west cargo gate, they form into a spearhead as the Tusk advance guard rushes them down the avenue. Blisters of light mark the air, exploding metal bulkheads, breaking girders and digging white powder from the ground. A descending hellstorm, chasing after them. The Snakes drop two of foe with concentrated fire before Priad orders them out of the gate. He himself pauses in the archway long enough for the first Tusk to reach him. Priad disembowels the disgusting creature with the lightning claw. In Raphon's name.

A saved grenade brings the cargo gate down after him and they are moving into open desert away from Rosetta Excelsis with the Chaos advance momentarily halted. The stark light of the midday suns burns the landscape white and shadowless, and there is no longer a horizon between white land and colourless sky.

The gunship awaits, hazed by heat and dust, in a narrow arroyo. Its entry ramp is down like a tongue in the soft dust. Bolter rounds whine after them as they board. The Dark Tusks have broken through in pursuit. Memnes and Priad, in the rear, turn and engage for one last time, killing as if to underline the undeniability of their victory.



**F**ROM SPACE, the surface of Rosetta is hard and white and sharply scored, like the back of a dry skull. They are just making transitory orbit when the munitions fire, nine hundred metres down in the oil reserves. There is no visible sign from up here. Almost an hour later, the surface turns dark and puffy, like wet-rot, the patch extending for three thousand square kilometres around the focus of the refinery. Sub-crust fires, linked to magmatic disruptions and fuelled by some unknown source of exploding power, burn out Rosetta a day later.

In the dank belly of the gunship, their discarded helmets rolling on the metal floor in little circles as the ship pitches and yaws, the survivors of Damocles sit in silence. They are tired, burned out, parched. They mourn. Now, and only now, do they allow themselves the thoughts. They have lost. Yet they have won. They have taken a victory, the right victory, but not one they expected or were sent to achieve.

Memnes takes out his flask. It is tubular, copper banded with straps of dull zinc. He draws it from a sheath on the thigh of his Imperator armour.

This is the Rite of the Sharing of Water, and none will look away. Six armoured forms, the remains of the assault squad, watch as Priad takes the flask. He yearns for cool, slaking water, but he knows this must come first. A sip of the salt water of Ithaka. He swigs it. It is sharp, warm, saline, bitter.

He looks up at them all and they pound their thigh armour in approval. The ceremony is over. But the bitterness in his mouth remains. Whether it's from the water of his homeworld or the mission, Priad isn't sure. ●

"LORD BELARIAN, SOMETHING TERRIBLE SEEMS TO BE HAPPENING ON PLANET OBZIDION'S SURFACE."

CONTINUE THE BOMBARDMENT COUNTDOWN. THE ANNIHILATION OF ITS CAPITAL SHOULD SERVE AS AN EXAMPLE TO OTHERS WHO WOULD BE REBELS.

## OBVIOUS TACTICS!

Episode Fifteen

SEEMINGLY UNKNOWN TO THE IMPERIUM THE CITIZENS OF OBZIDION HAVE BEEN TRICKED INTO TAKING REFUGE BENEATH THE CITY. THEY ARE TO BE SACRIFICED TO CHAOS, NOW A DAEMON HAS COME TO BIND THEIR SOULS INTO WARP ENERGY AND CREATE A NEW EYE OF TERROR. A LONE BLOOD ANGEL STANDS BETWEEN THE DAEMON AND HIS MISSION, AWAITING THE AID OF HIS TWO COLLEAGUES, A VETERAN SERGEANT AND A CALLIDUS ASSASSIN.

ABOVE THE CALLIDUS ASSASSIN PLOTS THE DAEMON'S DOWNFALL.

IF MY PLAN WORKS, I SHOULD BE ABLE TO PLUCK TROIUS AND ANTENOR FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH AT THE VERY MOMENT OF B'HAAN'S DEMISE.

"N'GREEL B'HAAN, I DO NOT STAND ALONE, THE NIGHT OF THE EMPEROR IS WITH ME!"

"AND YOU BELIEVE THAT WILL HELP YOU PUNY MAN? HA, HA, HA, HA!"

"EVEN NOW ANTENOR THROWS THE DOOMED GUN PLATFORM AT THE TEMPLE IN THE PANTAS MOUNTAINS!"

"BUT CAN TROILUS HOLD OUT LONG ENOUGH?"



I SEE NO ARMIES  
BESIDE YOU,  
I HOWEVER...

AM  
LEGION...

THEY SMOTHER ME!

"AND WHAT OF ANTENOR, ABOARD THE BLAZING PLATFORM?"



FOOL, SOON  
THE FLAMES WILL  
REACH THE  
MUNITIONS  
STORE ...

"WE SHALL ALL BE BLOWN  
TO CHAOS BEFORE WE  
HURT LORD B'HAA!"





COME ON, COME ON, ALIGN CURSE YOU! MUST WORK FAST...

... JUST MOMENTS TO TELEPORT THE MARINES FROM DOOM!

"NOOOO..."

WAKOOOM!!

"THE END IS HERE!"

AAAAAAA...

NUUURGHLLL!

SKLUUSH!

AAAAAAAH!

KRADDOOM!

TO BE CONCLUDED.



# A GENTLEMAN'S WAR

By Neil Rutledge

THE SUN BEAT down relentlessly. Otto von Eisenkopf felt the back of his neck burning. He dare not shift the position in which he had secreted himself though, he thought, as his neck burnt even hotter – this time with shame as he remembered the ants' nest. His first action with this confounded crew and he had to try and conceal himself on an ants' nest! That huge fellow – Lutyens, or whatever his name was – he hadn't laughed, he hadn't made a single sound, in fact, adhering to thrice-cursed Captain Molders's silence order! The man may not have laughed aloud, but Otto had seen the mirth in his eyes all right. Bah! A pox on all of them!

By Sigmar, what was he doing lying here like a bandit, the rocks digging through his padded brigandine as the distant hoofbeats came closer? A mere brigandine! Where was his own armour? And his scalp itched enough to drive him insane. Only the gods knew what manner of lice were in the lining of the battered arming cap he'd been given. A steel arming cap! So much for the fine armet which his squire, Henryk, had polished until it shone. So much for the wonderful plumes, all the way from Araby, which his sister had carefully dyed in the family colours. How proud of them he had been, even wearing them in his hat as he travelled up to join his father. Where was the glorious war he was promised?

Despite the faint sounds of the approaching enemy, Otto risked a slight movement, in quest of comfort alone of course, but a dislodged pebble clicked against another. He sensed the hidden eyes of Lutyens boring into him. By the Hammer, this wasn't what he had prepared for!

His mind drifted back to that journey of just two days ago. How different his mood had been then! He remembered the final stretch especially. They had travelled up and across open moor country, so very different from the fields and forests of his home. It had been like chancing upon a new land, bathed in sunshine, ringing with unfamiliar, haunting bird calls and the continual chatter of water over countless rocky stream beds. Water, to his mind, far sweeter and cooler than anything he had ever drunk at home. His heart had been as high and as bubbling as the larks that rose to sing as their horses had passed. He remembered that he had sung too, the old war ballads of the Empire. They had made Otto swell with pride, as he had thought he would soon be joining those illustrious ranks of legend. He had imagined himself charging head-to-head with the knightly orders.

So much for that! Here he was, baking on hot stones like a flat cake... Lurking, lurking with a tattered handful of mercenary pistoliers, fully half of them from outside the Empire. Even that fellow, Molders, the captain, had an accent which sounded more than half Bretonnian. How could his father trust such men? Trust them to reliably scout out which route the invading Bretonnian scoundrels would take.

Otto reflected that the Graf must be under terrible stress. His father had been made ill, perhaps, by the strain of having to defend their glorious homeland with only men such as these. Not a single knight! By Sigmar, what an insult! He resolved to himself strive all the harder to not let his father down, to at least be a reliable pair of eyes and ears on this

confounded mission. He was certainly confident he was more trustworthy than that scurvy Captain Molders. What manner of upstart was he to consider ambushing a Bretonnian noble like this? Lurking to trap a man whose code of honour would not permit him to flee even if outnumbered and who, if bested in fair combat, would certainly graciously submit to honourable capture and ransom.

Otto's anger began to rise. No, by Sigmar the Blessed, he would not permit this! It was his first combat and he was not going to enter it like a bandit. He would behave honourably, even if these low sell-swords would not. He could hear the hoof beats of the approaching Bretonnian party coming nearer. Abruptly he rose to his feet and crashed through the shrubs to stand on the path.

He stood straight and proud, sweeping the path with his eyes. The Bretonnian knight was just down the track, the scarlet of his horse's caparison dazzling in the sunlight. Riding beside him on a shaggy pony was a rough, leather-clad man with an eye patch, clutching a light crossbow, undoubtedly a local enlisted as a guide.

Otto raised his hand. 'Ho, sir knight,' he began. The Bretonnian reined in, his hatchet face looking startled. But it was the blur of movement to one side which caught Otto's eye. Just in time he ducked, and a crossbow bolt hissed past him. The guide, still holding the bow, had now swept out his sword with his free hand and was charging him. Otto struggled to draw his own blade. The knight was shouting something. Otto cursed and stepped smartly to one side, only narrowly avoiding the guide's murderous sword swipe. His own sword now in his hand, the young nobleman whirled to face the horseman who, rearing his mount, had turned with incredible speed to attack him again. His gaze locked by his enemy's one blazing eye, Otto desperately prepared to dodge again but suddenly the guide fell as Lutyens burst from the scrub and discharged a pistol into the side of his head.

Otto's mind reeled. The huge, rather slow pistolier had transformed into a raging colossus of action. He didn't seem to pause, even as he coolly dropped the knight's war-horse with his other pistol. Blonde hair streaming from under his burgonet, he charged to where the squires were riding up to protect their fallen master. He glanced back at Otto and shouted, 'Get at them, fool!'

Otto hesitated. He was staring aghast at his borrowed brigandine, splattered with blood from the slain guide. He looked up as a squire charged him. Gasping aloud, Otto just managed to roll behind the dead guide's horse. He barely parried a spear thrust from the Bretonnian and luckily managed to seize the weapon with his free hand. He stared up at the face of the squire: a grizzled, scarred man who hissed with exertion as he tried to wrest the weapon from the young noble's hand.

Otto stepped forward, trying to jab his sword at the Bretonnian's arm but he stumbled over the body of the dead guide, which was hanging, one foot trapped in the stirrups. Frantically, Otto tried to pull himself upright using his enemy's spear but he fell, twisting, amongst the horses' hooves. Through the stamping legs and dust, he stared into the scarred face as the squire grinned and stabbed down with his spear. Otto writhed but once more a pistol discharged close by and the Bretonnian, grin still fixed in place, toppled from his horse. His killer, a wiry pistolier in a dented helmet, paused just long enough to seize the horse's bridle and pull the beast away from the young noble, before running towards the main body of the Bretonnians. Otto, panting aloud, struggled to his feet and stumbled after him.

The knight, protected by a close knot of squires, was on his feet and ordering his men to the attack. Standing screened by his warriors, with one hand the Bretonnian attempted to beat the dust from his crimson surcoat, while with the other he held his sword aloft. 'They are only brigand dogs!' he yelled. 'Kill them!'

Charging forward, Otto almost screeched as he shouted with indignation, 'I am no brigand, but Otto von Eisenkopf of Barhaus! Defend yourself, insolent knight.'

Dimly, Otto was aware that there seemed to be very few pistoliers on the road or moving through the shrubs and boulders, but now his attention was fixed on the tight group of men immediately facing him. The squires hesitated, looking to their master for guidance. Slowly the knight gestured them aside and stepped forward. 'Very well,' the Bretonnian hissed, 'whatever honour you have, von Eisenkopf, prepare to test its mettle.'

The knight stood before him, looking almost warily at his young opponent. He held his sword – a fine, jewel-hilted affair – loosely by his side while his free hand toyed with a corner of his silk jupon. Otto sized his opponent up. The man was older and taller, very tall in fact, but sparsely built, with a thin face and hawk nose.

His reach would be long, Otto thought, but he himself had inherited his father's bull-like physique and he reckoned that, young though he was, he himself was perhaps the stronger. They were both shieldless but the Bretonnian was well armoured while Otto had only his brigandine. Otto smoothly raised his sword and took up his stance. He felt calmer now, on familiar ground. Just like the fencing hall, he thought to himself.

'A swordsman, eh?' Was there surprise in the thin features of the Bretonnian's face, or even hesitancy? Then the knight seemed to compose himself and took up his own stance and immediately attacked. It was not the speed of the thrust that caught Otto off guard, but its clumsiness. He parried, almost, and, had he not been so startled, could have finished the fight there and then. The knight lunged again and this time Otto was ready. Smoothly parrying and riposting, driving the knight back so quickly that he tripped, falling backwards with a grunt.

'Rise, sir,' Otto said, stepping back graciously and preparing for another bout. The knight rose slowly, but when

he bent to retrieve his sword he lifted it by the blade, not the hilt.

'I yield, von Eisenkopf. You have bested me.' The knight's words were drowned out in a sudden crashing of pistol and arquebus fire. Otto looked up. Molders must have sent men from further down the track up and over the outcrop to the north of the path. Now the pistoliers were firing down on the squires who were attacking their few, hard-pressed comrades around the track. Otto could hear the captain's voice booming, even through the gunfire. 'The horses, shoot the horses! Don't let them away, lads.'

The knight looked around too. 'Yield, my brave men!' he ordered. 'We are undone. Yield.'

The squires began dropping their weapons and, although somewhere further along the track there was still some shouting, the skirmish was over. Otto could see Molders standing on a boulder yelling, 'Round them up, you sluggards! Get moving!' He was shaking a wheel lock in the air in his strange staccato manner, the brandishes seeming to underline his words.

The Bretonnian knight turned back to Otto and bowed, 'Sir Guillame de Montvert. I am honoured to make your acquaintance.'

Otto smiled, somewhat surprised by the ease of his victory, 'And I yours, Sir Guillame.' Here at last was proper courtesy. Even in defeat, even as his men were being rounded up by the ragged pistoliers, this man could observe the proper formalities. The young nobleman continued, 'I should be delighted if you could dine with me tonight.'

The Bretonnian grinned. 'I seem to find myself with time to spare,' he shrugged modestly. 'I fear you find me inconvenienced, though. I regret my wardrobe is limited.'

'Fear not! Some arrangements will be made. Besides, my table is at present quite simple enough.'

At that moment Molders strode up. He moved with the typical briskness which had begun to irritate Otto so much. Molders was not a tall man and he

seemed to Otto to compensate for his short stature with an exaggerated cockiness of movement, the jut of his chest only exceeded by the jaunt of his chin and bristling beard.

'You are our prisoner,' he addressed the knight sharply. Then turning to one of his men, 'Take him and tie him like the rest.'

'Indeed not!' Otto protested, 'This man is my prisoner and a knight of honour. He is to dine with me this evening.'

The captain gasped and stared. His pale blue eyes seemed to protrude from his face in an effort to out-reach the grizzled spade of a beard now thrust accusingly at Otto. The pistolier behind him snorted as he attempted to suppress a laugh. Molders, used only to being obeyed without question, stood silent, glaring in astonishment at the young man before him.

Otto dared continue, 'Furthermore, I have found your conduct this day most reprehensible. We have brought dishonour on the good name of the Emperor and the reputation of his troops.' He looked at the trooper standing behind Molders. 'You, man! Fetch my mount and obtain a horse for Sir Guillame, and be quick about it!'

The trooper, the wiry man who had saved Otto earlier in the skirmish, had been grinning in buck-toothed amusement but now his expression changed to one of discomfiture. He had lost his helm; now he pulled his somewhat greasy curls in perplexity as he glanced at Molders. The captain shrugged in rare indecision as Otto once more turned to him. 'We will ride ahead, captain. See to the rest of the prisoners and follow as fast as you can.'

The confused pistolier had returned with Otto's horse and another. 'Sir Guillame? Please?' Otto gestured to the second horse, smoothly vaulted into his own saddle and, with an imperious gesture, hurled the battered arming cap off his head and into the scrub. He turned to address Molders once more. The captain's face was the colour of pickled red cabbage. He was silently gesturing for Lutyens to mount and

accompany Otto. Otto was about to protest but the captain looked up and his glare was so fierce that the young man held his tongue.

'Lutyens will see to your needs... young sir.' Molders's voice was clipped even more than usual and barely audible. Without a further word he turned his back and began issuing orders to his men.

'Well, Sir Guillame, shall we ride?' Otto said brightly, amused by what he took as Molders's pique at being reprimanded. 'We must ride hard if we are to be back at the forward camp by dusk.' The Bretonnian nodded and they set off briskly, Lutyens following behind.

At first they conversed lightly, exchanging details of their family, discussing the moor country and its prospects for falconry. Otto felt wholly at ease with the older Bretonnian but, his heart high once more, he was aware of his duties. Behind the bright chat, his mind was working furiously. Otto was far too good mannered to question the knight regarding military matters, but as the conversation went on, his prisoner, seemingly disarmed by his own good cheer, let slip a few clues. These clues pointed to what Otto already suspected; that Sir Guillame and his squires were scouting the route for the main Bretonnian attack. It was the obvious route, really! The one Otto would have taken were he in their opponent, the Duke de Boncegne's place. A far better route than the narrow difficult southern pass or the long swing, deeper into the Empire to the north. A bold direct approach across the moors and a sharp, honourable conflict to decide the issue.

'You are preoccupied, young sir.' Sir Guillame's voice broke into Otto's thoughts.

'Yes, yes, I am sorry. Please excuse my ill manners. It is no way to treat an honoured guest.'

'Perhaps you are missing a lady?' the Bretonnian asked smiling.

Otto blushed, 'I have been training hard, Sir Guillame, and hope for a commission in the Reiksguard.'

The Bretonnian laughed. 'Ah, you Imperials,' he chided mockingly, 'You are much too serious. A man must strive for honour, yes, but he can love too! What is life without a little romance?' Sir Guillame went on, expanding the other aspects of what he regarded as the highlights of a knightly life.

Otto nodded and occasionally added a polite word but his mind was elsewhere once more. The mention of the Reiksguard had reminded him of the opportunities which lay before him. His father would be well pleased. He had tempered the baseless actions of the pistoliers with honour, captured an important prisoner with due decorum and was now gaining valuable information. He could see the conflict unfolding. The Bretonnians would advance and be brought to battle on the moors. Otto himself would fight bravely and the whole affair would end in a most satisfactory manner. He was still vaguely worried about how reliable the pistoliers really were, but he was confident that his father would act quickly on his suspicions. Yes, all would be well. For the time being he set his concerns aside and determined to enjoy the ride, the scenery and the Bretonnian's company.



THEY ARRIVED BACK at the forward camp just as the dusk was deepening into night. Otto swelled with pride as they passed the pickets and he was able to declare himself and report he was returning with an honoured prisoner, Sir Guillame de Montvert. They made their way through the camp, Otto riding with head held high. He felt almost proprietorial as he looked around, eyes scanning the activity that was revealed only in fire-lit, flickering patches. Men huddled in their tent groups, cooking, polishing weapons, binding arrow fletchings. Troops engaged in the myriad small tasks necessary when preparing for battle. Otto's spirits soared with the thrill

of it all. How he had waited for this, to serve with honour his Emperor, land and family! His ears heard the camp sounds almost as music. The subdued voices with the occasional laugh or burst of song, the clink of a ladle against a cooking pot, the heavier ringing from a distant field forge, the noises from the tethered horses. Aye, horses. Horses, not knights' chargers!

Otto's good spirits promptly vanished and he was suddenly glad that they had arrived at sundown, so Sir Guillame could not see the rag-tag composition of his father's advanced force. He winced as he thought of it and remembered his own shock at his first sight of the troops: scruffy woodsmen from Stirland, ruffianly-looking local light horse and a large contingent of mercenary hackbut men and pistoliers. He had protested to his father that their forces were inadequate. The memory of his father's response still made the blood flush hot under his skin. His father, nobleman of the Empire and respected general, had actually stated that pistoliers were cheaper to field than knights and were a good deal more useful. Otto's very ears burned as he remembered his father's curt words, 'This isn't a crusade against Araby, Otto! It's a border squabble, provoked by the greed of that adventurer, de Boncenne. He's using the usual territory problems as an excuse to get his hands on the coal mines by Grunwasser. You don't call out the Reiksguard to deal with bandits!'

Otto's worries for his father returned in a rush. How could he think such of a duke, a pillar of Bretonnian chivalry? He was obviously ill, worn out by the stress of attempting to defend this difficult border with such paltry forces and, perhaps, was subtly misled by these unreliable mercenaries in which he seemed to place such faith. Again, Otto resolved not to let his father down. He, at least, was dependable and he had the information that was so badly needed. But first he had his chivalrous duties to attend to.

He guided Sir Guillame to his own tent where he found his youthful squire busy polishing the buckles of his charger's

harness. They shone in the firelight but the sight, far from pleasing Otto, only reminded him of how distasteful he found it to ride the rough-looking, if hardy, mount he had been given to accompany the pistoliers. Young Henryk rose immediately. Even in camp, his dapper form was immaculate in the red and white Eisenkopf colours. His face seemed to shine pristine in the firelight. 'Welcome home, sir! I see you have a guest.'

Otto's irritation showed in the brusqueness with which he ordered the squire to see to his distinguished prisoner. He ordered that the Bretonnian should have the use of his own tent, while his personal effects were to be transferred to the tent of his servant. He repented almost at once when he saw how courteous the good-natured Henryk was in addressing and attending to the Bretonnian and, to try and save the servant extra labour, looked for Lutyens to order him to see to the horses, but the mercenary was nowhere to be seen.

'Typical,' Otto muttered to himself. 'Uncouth, uncultured and unreliable!' He gave further instructions to Henryk, excused himself to Sir Guillame and went to wash and change, before presenting himself to his father.

Inside the cramped tent of his servant, Otto cleaned and arranged himself as best he could in the flickering lamp light. It was somewhat awkward but he was smiling to himself as he stepped outside to gain the headroom necessary to attach his plumes to his hat. He imagined receiving his father's congratulations on the capture of Sir Guillame. He pictured the Graf's serious face, as his beloved son explained the ill-dealings of the pistoliers and his suspicions of them. He saw in his mind's eye his father's pride and relief that he had such a son to count on. Still smiling, he checked briefly that his prisoner was comfortable, then made his way to his father's quarters.

The Graf's tent was in the very centre of the camp. It was large but made of plain leather, as tough and unpretentious as the man within. Otto straightened himself

as he saw his father's standard hanging above the door, bloodied by the light of the great braziers in front of the tent, and his heart filled with pride as the two halberdiers on guard smartly saluted him and stepped aside to let him pass.

Immediately within was a large chamber, well lit with lanterns and furnished with a variety of folding wooden stools and tables. Otto smiled as Gunther, his father's veteran aide-de-camp, greeted him. It was hard to tell the scars from the lines of age on the old man's face but he still had a sprightly step as he moved to salute Otto.

'Greetings, sir,' the old soldier said warmly. 'You have captured an honourable prisoner, I believe.'

Otto found it hard not to grin like a schoolboy. 'I have won some very little honour,' he replied. 'I must report to my father.'

'The general is in conference,' Gunther told him. 'With Herr Lutyens, one of your comrades in the affray.'

'Comrade?' Otto clicked his tongue, his good humour dispelled. What was that oaf doing plaguing his father? Concocting some tale to cover the mercenaries' reprehensible behaviour, no doubt.

'Some warm wine, sir?' The aide was offering him a somewhat battered but gleaming pewter goblet, a gently steaming flask in his other hand.

'What?' Otto asked, preoccupied with what the dubious Lutyens might be telling his father. 'Ach, yes, why not?' he said grimly. Lutyens could have his crow but Otto would see his father got the true story! He settled himself irritably on a stool by the tapestries that curtained off his father's inner chamber and sipped at his wine. Gunther, ever the tactful servant, busied himself quietly at the far side of the chamber.

Otto could distinguish two voices on the far side of the tapestry – the deep drone of Lutyens and his father's terse speech. Habitually polite, the young noble was about to move to another stool out of earshot, when he again wondered what tale Lutyens might be spinning. He had best listen, he thought to himself. His

father was obviously worn down by his onerous duties as warden and was already placing too much reliance on these brigands. He had better learn as much as he could if he was to help his father. Still sipping his wine, he surreptitiously leant a little closer to the tapestry.

'So they put up little fight?' the Graf was asking.

'Little enough, sir. They seemed of scant quality.'

Otto nearly choked on his wine. Scant quality! Who was this rustic to judge a knight of Bretonnia?

'And where is Captain Molders?'

'He is following with the main body, sir.'

'I expected a prompt report from him, Lutyens. Not advanced warning from you.'

'Young Master Eisenkopf was in haste to bring back the Bretonnian knight, sir.'

Otto coloured as he heard his father snort, 'Not that much haste, it seems! He hasn't reported yet! Your opinion, Lutyens: what of this Bretonnian party?'

'I'm not sure, sir, but they didn't seem up to much to me and Captain Molders reckoned they were odd too, sir. I believe he thought them some kind of ruse.'

Otto stood up rapidly. His father was listening to nonsense, or worse, treachery. Without waiting further, he brushed aside the hanging and strode into his father's quarters. Lutyens sat nearer, his huge bulk balanced precariously on a camp stool. Facing him across a folding table sat Otto's father, the Graf von Eisenkopf. The Graf was a powerful man but even he looked small compared to Lutyens. Perhaps it was this that seemed, to Otto's eyes, to lend him a shrunken air. To his anxious son, the Graf's broad, open face looked pale even in the warm lamp light. And was there more grey in that close cropped hair and beard?

'Father,' Otto began breathlessly, 'I have additional information regarding the Bretonnians' plans.'

Lutyens swung his ice-blue eyes towards him and his father looked up coolly, fixing Otto with the same stern gaze that

had met his childhood misdemeanours.

'It must be important information, indeed, for you to have forgotten your normal courtesy,' the Graf observed, calmly.

Otto coloured but began again. 'This man...' He was about to berate the pistolier as a completely untrustworthy source of information but something in the gaze of his father made him change his mind. 'This man may not have all the facts. He has not spoken with our noble prisoner, Sir Guillame de Montvert.'

'I do not doubt it,' the Graf agreed. 'But he has made his report promptly, as a dutiful trooper should and I myself had hoped to speak with de Montvert, at least before too long.' His voice was soft but the rebuke was not lost on Otto. The young man knew better than to try to make excuses to his father, but inside he felt a burning sense of injustice. The general was still speaking, now to Lutyens. 'Thank you, trooper, for your report. You are dismissed for the present.'

The big pistolier rose and bowed somewhat awkwardly. 'Yes, sir.' He was usually slow of movement but Otto thought he detected reluctance in his measured step as he departed.

On pretence of straightening the curtain, Otto checked that Lutyens had indeed left. He turned and the Graf gestured to him. 'Sit down, my son. Congratulations on the capture of the prisoner. But I am surprised you have not brought him to me.'

'I... I thought it good manners to allow a man of his rank to prepare himself properly before presenting himself.'

'You are thoughtful but we are not court, my son. We are defending our land. It is more important for me to get information quickly.'

'Sorry, father.'

'No matter. Make your report.'

Much of the fire and anger had been chastened out of Otto. He related his views to his father a great deal more quietly than he had imagined when riding back. He described the ambush, mentioning his distaste for such skulking

tactics and telling how he had sprung forth and challenged the Bretonnian knight. He considered voicing his suspicions about the loyalty of Captain Molders, but the grim set of his father's jaw made him change his mind. He would keep his fears to himself for the present, and wait and see what actions were to be taken.

'So you sprung the ambush too soon.' His father's voice was steely.

'I acted as a gentleman, father.'

'I placed you under the orders of Captain Molders and expected you to obey him.'

Otto's resentment boiled over: 'Father! The man is a mercenary! He knows nothing of honour. Listen to his accent, he sounds more like a Bretonnian! You know the trouble these locals cause you. Brigands, as much a thorn for us as for their enemies. How can he be trusted?'

His father banged his fist on the table, silencing him. He was about to speak and then passed his hand wearily across his brow. Otto regarded him warily. He did look tired. These past months since he had been appointed warden must have been hard. Battling Orcs or defending against Beastmen in the east was arduous but at least you knew where you stood with an Orc. Here the damned locals on both sides of the border were always feuding, raiding and seemingly caring little for Emperor or King.

'Father, I am here to serve you loyally.'

The Graf returned his earnest gaze. 'I know, Otto, but war isn't like the ballads or the parade ground. Molders is no knight but he is a veteran of this border squabbling and I'll stake my sword he is not false. I'm far from sure about just how chivalrous this opportunist the Duke de Boncence is. What I am sure of is that the Emperor runs the South March on a tight purse and I have precious few forces to impede Boncence. If he pushes up to the Grunwasser, he'll lodge himself like a halfling in a bakery and be twice as difficult to shift.'

Listening, Otto was a tumult of emotions: shame yet resentment at this chastisement, worry for his father and a

tingling sense of excitement at being involved in such tense matters.

'I must have more information,' his father was continuing. 'Molders will report as soon as he arrives. Meanwhile bring me the knight and I will question him.'

'Yes, father. Will he be dining with us?'

'No he will not!'

Otto winced. 'I will fetch him at once.'

As Otto left, Molders was just coming into the tent. The pistolier captain pulled his shoulders back even further than normal and gave a strangled snort as he passed. The young noble glared at him before stiffly walking to his tent.

When he arrived, the Bretonnian was sitting by the fire, wrapped in Otto's second cloak and thanking Henryk who had just topped up his goblet. The knight looked up, 'Ah, greetings, Otto. I compliment you on your hospitality.' He gestured with his goblet.

'I fear I must interrupt your rest, Sir Guillame. My father...' Otto hesitated slightly, 'My father desires to speak to you. I am sure he will not detain you long. I will wait until you return and we can dine together. I shall escort you to the Graf at once.'

Otto's plans to dine were to be frustrated, however, and scarce three hours later he was in the saddle again.



O TTO PRIDED HIMSELF on his horsemanship and was indeed reckoned a natural in the saddle, but he had never encountered riding like this before. Throughout the scant hours of darkness that were left they pressed on like men possessed. There was no moon and Otto wondered how his horse could see to pick his way over the rough hillsides, never mind how Molders was guiding the troops. Dawn brought easier going as they reached the moorland plateau which marked the no-man's land on the south march between Bretonnia

and the Empire, but there was no change in pace. The pistoliers dispersed themselves more widely but they did not even stop for breakfast, the men sipping from their flasks and eating on the move instead.

Otto was very weary but inside he was a conflicting mass of emotion! Pride that his father had seen fit to dispatch them to check his own theory and scout for a Bretonnian force coming over the moor. But there was anger at Molders's barely concealed contempt for what he saw as a wasted errand. The captain firmly believed that the main Bretonnian attack was coming by the southern route. The man was mad, or worse, an enemy agent. How could he doubt the honour of knights such as Sir Guillame? No! They would locate the Bretonnian force, his father would marshal his troops and battle would be joined on the moor.

It would be Otto's first battle. Not a large one admittedly, in fact more of a border skirmish over a couple of valleys and those wretched coal mines, but what mattered the size of the conflict when true honour was at stake? He had heard the pistoliers talk of the Duke of Boncenne as an upstart, keen to get his hands on the profits of those mines. How could they think so of a duke? They were the mercenaries! More likely the duke viewed the whole venture as a test of honour, an adventure to prove himself in his new post of march warden and quite right too! Any noble of courage and mettle would do similarly.

The day wore on. They had halted briefly but Molders was relentless, and by late afternoon they had picked up the cart road which ran from Dreiburg across the border. The pistoliers followed the road but were still well spread out in a long skirmish line. Otto looked to his right where Lutyens was riding, blonde hair streaming out behind him in the stiff breeze, his huge form dwarfing his small mount. It was worrying how the giant had always been somewhere near. Had Molders posted the big man to keep a special watch over him? Was the pistolier captain aware of Otto's suspicions?

Anxiety twisted in his stomach. If the pistoliers proved to be traitors it would be very easy for them to kill him. He would stand no chance against so many. A cloud passed over the sun and the wild, open landscape of the moors seemed suddenly bleak. The craggy rock outcrops took on the guise of sinister watching heads, roughly haired with heather, peering at Otto. The incessant chatter of the chill streams, a babble which had once echoed Otto's bubbling spirits now seemed to mock him as they approached the rise to the scarp edge where the moor descended in a rocky jumble to the Bretonnian plains. Here Molders halted his men, and, leaving most with the horses, led a few forward on foot to look out over the land ahead.

The captain signalled that Otto should come too, and again the young man was irked to find himself chaperoned by the hulking Lutyens. Using the rough, boulder-strewn slope as an excuse, Otto tried to pick a route that led him away from his unwelcome shadow but wherever he moved Lutyens's slow footfall followed. Otto's heart beat faster, faster than the climb should have occasioned, as he wondered what lay at the scarp edge. Would this be the scene of his death at the hands of traitors? A supposed accident on the cliff edge? Apprehensively his hand rested on his sword hilt but he felt powerless. He hung back when, approaching the skyline, the pistoliers dropped and crawled towards the edge. Lutyens stopped beside him. Ahead, Molders was cautiously peering through the gap between two rocks. He reached down to a pouch at his belt and pulled out a small brass tube. A spyglass, an item of expense and rarity, looted doubtless! The captain scrutinised the land ahead.

There seemed to be a ripple of expectation amongst the pistoliers. Several glanced back. Their faces showed interest, expectation. Were they Molders's most trusted henchmen, here to witness Otto's murder? The captain turned impatiently and even behind that spade of a beard, Otto could clearly detect a wolfish grin. He gestured imperiously for

Otto to come forward. The young noble moved forward, tensed for action. There was a touch on his shoulder and he whirled, sword half-drawn before his arms were caught in Lutyens's iron grip.

'Get down, by Sigmar! You will reveal us!' the giant hissed.

Shaking, bewildered, Otto crawled to where Molders beckoned with his spyglass. There was a glint in the captain's eye as he gestured to Otto to look ahead. Heart pounding and trying to watch the pistolier out of the corner of his eye, Otto glanced around the boulder in front of him.

He gasped at what he saw and his fears vanished in a rush of vindicated pride. Some distance from the bottom of the slope a long line of horsemen was trotting towards them, the sun glinting off their helmets and spear points. Squires screened the advance of the main force which was arranged along the road behind. He had been right! He glanced over to where Molders was lying but the captain did not look round. Molders was scrutinising the slowly advancing Bretonnians. Otto looked at them too. The main force was quite a distance away and some dust was rising but Otto could see a collection of bright banners floating above the head of the procession and beneath them a splash of colour he took to be the caparisons of the knights' chargers. Behind marched a column of infantry, a mixture of archers and men-at-arms most probably.

Molders just kept staring through the spyglass and the outriders were nearly at the bottom of the slope before he made any move, silently gesturing to Meyer, his lieutenant, to take the glass. Otto smiled to himself. Most probably the captain was sour at being proved wrong. Meyer looked for some minutes before lowering the instrument, his thin lips pursed and dark brow creased with concern. He passed the glass to Lutyens with a soft oath, 'By Sigmar! A ruse.'

Molders grinned harshly at Otto before wriggling backwards with Meyer, gesturing to Lutyens to pass the glass to Otto. The young noble paused to admire the instrument. It was crafted exquisitely,

Dwarf-made, Otto thought. Lutyens was impatiently signing to him to hurry so he lifted it to his eye. It took him a second to focus it and when he did he let out an involuntary whistle, immediately cut short by a vicious jab from Lutyens. The image was miraculous, far superior to that given by his father's own prized telescope, one of the best the craftsmen of the Empire could produce. He could see every detail of the faces of the horsemen, now beginning to pick their way up the long slope, and he was surprised at what an unkempt crew they appeared. This was nothing to the shock he got when he trained the glass on the knights leading the column further back along the road. He picked out the Duke by his banner and horse trappings but through the Dwarfish instrument he could see that the figure on the charger was not the darkly handsome, moustached warrior he'd heard of. Indeed it was only a young stripling of a youth, gawky and pale. The rest of the procession was equally startling. There was the occasional warlike veteran but most seemed youths or old men and many of the spearmen seemed armed with farm implements, not weapons of war. Lutyens was tugging at his boot. His mind in turmoil, Otto squirmed back and then ran over to where Molders was issuing a furious stream of orders.

The captain was addressing Meyer. 'Make sure they see you. Act just as if you had contacted their real force. Don't get too close, so that they stay confident we haven't spotted their ruse. You'll not have trouble with their skirmishers if you keep back, they're only there to try to make sure we don't get close enough to spot their damned deception. The rest of us must get back to the main camp at once. Sigmar knows, this will be too close!'



THE RIDE OUT had set a hard pace; the ride back was punishing. They slowed to a walk only where the

going was so rough as to demand it, otherwise it was a constant gallop. Otto, who had been disdainful of the pistoliers' wiry mounts, was forced to concede that even if the small horses looked rough, their endurance was exceptional. His mind was filled with the face of the youth that had been masquerading as the Duke – and under the Duke's own banner! What perfidy! He felt almost physically sick when he thought of the base nature of the trick. Even now the Bretonnian force must be advancing unhindered, probably by the southern route, as Molders had predicted, damn him! Otto shivered when he thought of the implications for the honour of the Empire and for his father. How wrong he had been! He looked ahead, to where Molders was riding, resolute but seemingly unperturbed. A blush of shame coloured the young noble's face as he remembered his judgement of the pistolier captain. By the Hammer, what were they to do?

The long summer dusk was just deepening into night proper when Molders barked a curt command and most of the pistoliers wheeled off towards the south. There were only six of them now, still pressing on towards his father. Some of Otto's old anxieties resurfaced. Where were the others going? Was he now riding with traitors who would turn on him to ensure the news of the Bretonnians' vile trick never reached his father? Once more his hand toyed with his sword hilt and he began to try and scrutinise his companions as best he could in the closeness of the night. Each seemed entirely oblivious of him, silent automatons ploughing through the gathering darkness. He was exhausted and his mind was whirling. Would they be in time? Again he felt nauseous. How could a man fight with honour in times like these? The jolting as the horse pushed steadily over the rough ground seemed to shake him to the bone. Each shock from the saddle emphasised the jarring of his thoughts: perfidy, treachery, failure, dishonour! By Sigmar, they had to be on time! Instinctively he tried to spur his mount faster but the horse tossed its head and whinnied in protest.

'Patience!' came Lutyens's slow voice out of the darkness from Otto's left. 'The horse won't rush the broken ground in the dark.'

'Sigmar!' Otto hissed bitterly, 'What kind of world is this, where even a horse can act more aptly than I can?'

The nightmare hours dragged on, the ground studded with rocks, the miles with self-recriminations and doubt as Otto desperately tried to picture where the Bretonnians might have reached and their possible plans. If they successfully pushed through the southern passes onto the flat lands along the Grunwasser all would be lost! The Graf's ill-assorted force of light troops, even stiffened by his own household halberdiers, couldn't face Bretonnian chivalry on the plains. Chivalry! The word had bitter ring to it now. Would they be in time? Otto's thoughts whirled on. The pistoliers were supposed to be able to doze in the saddle. He couldn't have slept now for worry even if he could keep his seat. Where was the camp? How much further?

The challenge from their own picket lines came suddenly and Otto almost cried aloud with relief. They hastened to report to his father. 'Fresh horses and prepare yourselves to be away again at once,' Molders ordered before he dismounted and strode into the Graf's headquarters. Confused by a sense of mingled anxiety and shame, Otto thought of returning to his own tent, but instead he trotted after Molders.

The captain was sitting on a stool in the foyer talking hurriedly with Otto's father. The Graf paced in front of him while old Gunther served the pistolier a hasty meal of bread and cheese. Otto studied his father nervously. His shoulders were still squared and he stood straight but his face was drawn and his fists were clenched. Once Otto would have bristled with indignation that a mere mercenary captain should sit while his father stood, but now the young man just waited awkwardly, the sick feeling in his stomach stronger than ever.

His father heard him enter and turned. 'Sit, Otto,' he gestured to a stool by Molders, 'and eat quickly. Gunther, send

word to Otto's manservant to prepare for his master to depart again quickly.' He resumed talking to Molders. 'So, an elaborate ruse! You were right to suspect them. We may just be able to stop them if we despatch a fast force at once. I have the troops ready. It all hinges on how far the Bretonnians have proceeded on the southern route.'

'If they have taken that route,' Molders said through a mouthful of bread, crumbs falling from his beard. A twinge of Otto's old resentment returned. Such familiarity from a mere captain! The Graf showed no resentment, however, and spoke, even respectfully, to the pistolier.

'No, they will have. You are right about that too, I am sure. Besides, the Magister of Dreiburg is well placed to intervene in the unlikely event they have swung north.' The Graf clenched his fists. 'It is a matter of timing. I'll send ahead yourself and your men, two hundred of the Stirlander archers, all of the hackbut men who have mounts, von Grunwald with his light guns and fifty local horse. The Stirlanders will have to manage on foot or double up on horses; they've done it before. You will attempt an ambush in the foothills. I have alerted Dreiburg and I will follow you with the remaining hackbut men and the halberdiers. We will take up a defensive position at Ravensridge, should you need to fall back. If you are caught on the plain, it could go very ill for you!'

'We must hope against that, my lord, but by my reckoning we have a good chance of getting there.' Molders looked at Otto sarcastically. 'The lads set a good pace when their lives and booty depend on it.' The captain took a swig of ale and, standing up, abrupt as ever, continued, 'Right, swilling ale doesn't prime pistols. We'll be off.' He stared pointedly at Otto again. 'Besides I can't afford to fail you, I haven't had my full pay yet!' He gave a strangled noise that might have been a laugh and went out.

'Sigmar go with you!' the Graf called after the pistolier. Otto felt himself flush at the memory of his mistakes as his father turned to him. There were traces of worry around the Graf's eyes but there

was no reproach in his face as he said, 'You had best hurry and join them, my son. You will acquit yourself well, I am sure. My thoughts go with you.'

Otto stammered, 'I am... sorry, father.'

'Sorry?'

'Sorry for my misjudgement.'

'We all misjudge things, lad. You are here to learn. Now go.'

'Thank you.' Otto turned.

'Otto, one other thing. Sir Guillame has disappeared, and so has your best palfrey. I fear the two disappearances may be connected. Don't blame Henryk. It is I who should have ensured a stricter guard.'

This news stung Otto more than anything he had yet heard. 'But... but he was a knight, a man of honour!'

His father shrugged. 'You can't keep ward over the honour of others. Just keep your own intact, son – and your hide! Now go and serve your Emperor and your father.'

'Yes, sir.'

But Otto was perplexed as he left the tent. The man whom he had trusted, looked to as an example of chivalry, had coldly manipulated him. Duped him! As he made his way to join the pistoliers, he felt sick in his heart.



**I**T WAS ANOTHER tough ride and, in truth, Otto was weary to his very core as they trotted through the darkness. This time they had a road to follow, albeit a rough one, and Molders was driving his men hard. Otto rode at the front of the column in the same group as the captain. To his discomfiture, even through his tiredness, he noticed Lutyens was still his shadow. Now, though, the discomfort wasn't fear of treachery but bitterness that he could have been so wrong. Lutyens was his chaperone – not to cloak some dark plot, but instead to look after him, and he had needed him! The memory of Lutyens saving him in that first action

returned with the sharpness of a spear thrust and he squirmed in his saddle. The whirling succession of tortured thoughts returned again: perfidy, treachery, failure, dishonour! Above all was the incessant question, would they be in time? His head slumped to his chest, Otto ground his teeth and left control to his mount; the hill pony he thought, with another wave of bitterness, that could act more appropriately than he, Otto von Eisenkopf, noble of the Empire!

The night wore on, measured out by the drumming of hooves, and the pounding thoughts: perfidy, treachery, failure, dishonour! Would they be in time? Otto looked to his side and there, sure enough, was Lutyens. The giant's head lolled. By Sigmar! He was asleep in the saddle! Otto had an urge to hurl his dagger at him. How could he sleep? Otto's fingers clenched the reins until they hurt. Couldn't they make better speed? The old notion of a traitorous Molders deliberately delaying progress came back into his head. Angrily Otto forced it aside, knowing it to be wrong, but a shred of the notion persisted. The young noble cursed himself. By the Hammer, was he himself so shallow? Was he so base as to hope for the imagined treachery to be true just so as to have the gratification of salving his own pride? His world seemed to have crumbled; was he now crumbling too? The hooves, and his thoughts, drummed on.

By dawn they were climbing into the foothills but the light brought no relief to Otto. The sunrise hurt his tired eyes and as he looked back over his shoulder he took little comfort in what he saw. The dust-shrouded column wound after them, now slowed by the narrowed and steep road. The slower pace was bad enough but Otto wondered, with a twinge of what felt disturbingly like fear, what was going to happen when they did contact the Bretonnians? How could this rag-tag force defeat battle-hardened knights? Boncenne may have behaved like some base, fairground mountebank but he was an experienced general who had stood in the lists against the most martial of Bretonnian nobility. Who could they set

against this formidable warrior? Molders, compensating for his short stature with an aggressive swagger and that ridiculous beard? Von Grunwald, head of an ancient noble family but a crank obsessed with the pack horse-toted light guns he had designed? Himself, a young fool who had once hoped for a commission in the Reiksguard and was now riding only with mercenary pistoliers?

Daylight or not, the hooves, and the thoughts, drummed on: perfidy, treachery, failure, dishonour!

Suddenly there was a stir. One of the advance scouts came cantering back towards them. Otto tensed wondering if they had contacted the Bretonnians. Was all lost, their opponents already descending into the plains? The man rode up to Molders. He was breathless, his jerkin plastered with dust that had also stiffened his sweat-soaked hair into absurd tufts. Otto edged his mount closer to Molders to hear the scout's report. The man was gathering breath. Was his gap-toothed mouth a grimace of worry or a triumphant grin?

'Report man, for Sigmar's sake,' Otto muttered under his breath.

'The valley is clear, captain,' the man grinned. 'It's the perfect spot for an ambush. The track is quite broad, steep slope one side, more gentle hills the other, but it's only an illusion of openness. The river is swift and deep, a formidable barrier to fleeing troops. Armoured men would never get across it'

'Very good, trooper,' Molders replied. He turned and began quickly issuing orders, marshalling his troops.

The road became steeper, winding up the rocky, wooded hillside. The sun was shining strongly and the woods rang with birdsong but there was a tension in the air and Otto noted nervous movements all around him as even the seasoned pistoliers checked and rechecked their wargear.

At the top of the hill Molders gave more orders. 'Von Grunwald, his guns and the archers will block off here where the path climbs steeply to the hilltop. The hackbut men will hold the steepest craggy slopes,

yonder in the valley centre. The pistoliers and the light horse will close off the rear and block the Bretonnians' retreat. They must keep especially well up slope bar some few, well hidden, to signal when the last of the enemy pass. It is our best plan; we must hope they don't scout properly in their haste.'

Von Grunwald and his guns began deploying to cover the road up out of the valley. Watching the old man working with his men unloading the guns Otto's anxieties returned. 'This is an Empire noble?' he mused, bewildered, as he stared at the short, wiry old man wearing only tattered hose, his face grimy and his head crowned with an amazing shock of white hair.



**B**EWILDERED HE might have been but Otto was still impressed by the speed with which the troops deployed, and at such quiet determination and discipline. Even if they were rough and ready, unpolished and mercenary by calling, they certainly seemed apt to their work. Indeed it seemed to him that he was the one out of place as he handed his mount to one of the local horsemen assigned to keep their horses safely out of sight down slope, away from the line of Bretonnian advance. All of his training had been to fight from the saddle and in the open and here he was facing his second action, once more on foot, and once more in hiding. Woodenly, Otto followed the other pistoliers down from the boulder-strewn crest.

They descended into the woods that overlooked the valley but stayed well up the slope, picking their way with some difficulty through the tangle. At one point Otto looked down through a narrow break in the trees; even with his inexperienced eye, he could see what a splendid site for an ambush it was. Lutyens, scrambling alongside him, was grinning from ear to ear and Otto was

amazed to hear the normally taciturn pistolier whisper to him, 'They are finished! This will be butchery.'

'We can hold back armoured knights?' Otto panted.

'Here,' the giant replied, 'here we won't hold them, we'll destroy them!' He gave Otto a pat on the back which almost knocked him down the slope.

'But if they scout ahead?' Otto feared that the worry he felt might sound in his voice but Lutyens just grinned more broadly.

'When have Bretonnians ever scouted properly? They ride into battle as brazen as Marienburg harlots. Besides, they will feel they have no reason to. They think they have duped us. It takes more than some gilded duke to fool old Molders though!'

Otto was amazed at the affection in the big man's voice as he spoke of his captain. But he had little time for reflection as he scrambled up the steep slope, his hose tearing on the brambles, branches scoring his face. He was almost trembling with exhaustion before, quite some distance higher, they came on Molders directing his forces down the steep, wooded slope to their final hiding place. The captain was jammed, seemingly at ease, in against a tree trunk, beard thrust out, his arms a jerky windmill of action as he signed his men into position. Where did these men get their endurance?

'Get comfortable,' Lutyens advised him as they reached their allotted position. 'And watch out for the ants!' The memory conjured up by the jibe stung even more than the ants had. Otto found a likely spot, settled down and began the wait.

Hours dragged past. As Otto brushed a fly away from his face yet again, he was glad he had taken Lutyens's advice and found a comfortable spot. Nestled behind the roots of a fallen tree, he was well hidden and could shift his position easily and without danger but it was still sweltering and it seemed as if he had been stuck here for days, not just hours. The waiting cast a gloom over him. The nausea he had felt back at his father's tent

was back. He lay listless, staring up at the shifting patterns of sunlight streaming down through at the waving screen of leaves. It bewildered him and made the sick feeling worse. The whole world bewildered him now. He was dog-tired but as he carefully rolled over, turning his eyes from the light, he knew he couldn't sleep. What if this was a mistake too? Had the Bretonnians really taken this route? He thought of their trickery and it depressed him. He thought of Sir Guillame stealing his best horse and fleeing like a common soldier, and his gloom was mixed with shame and anger.

More hours seemed to pass. He stared at a beetle crawling along a tree root. It was all right for the beetle, it just crawled around and did, well, whatever beetles did. It could live its life as it ought. But what about him? How should he live his life? What had happened to the rules and codes he had learned and loved? How could he live with honour? Eventually, as the time crawled past, these feelings turned into self-pity, as Otto remembered his joyful anticipation of battle as he rode up to join his father. Five days ago, or five years? A vast gulf at any rate. Where were the fine plumed armet and shining plate he had imagined? No lance by his hand either, but a clumsy wheel lock pistol. Sigmar save him! It had come to this, lurking again. His second ambush! Two actions, both sprung from skulking. He almost let out a bitter laugh but choked it back just in time.

Otto saw Lutyens's head turn. The blonde giant was wedged in what seemed like a tortuous position, yet he hadn't moved once. Otto expected a reproachful glare over his choked laugh but Lutyens didn't even look at him. He was concentrating on something else. Otto listened, straining to hear above the noise of the river, and eventually caught, faint but unmistakable, the sound of horses' hooves and the jingle of harness. His tiredness vanished instantly; he started to peer around the roots of the tree but Lutyens shook his head. The young noble felt the tension in the pit of his stomach. His pulse raced. They waited. Were the Bretonnians just an advance guard? Had

they sent squires to scout the steep slope? The faint noises continued. The minutes passed. They waited. Lutyens looked as if he was dozing, confound the man! The noise of the hoof beats got louder. Was this the main party? Still no noise of alarm. They waited. Otto's hand strayed to his pistol and closed on the grip. The sound of the unseen Bretonnians' progress continued. Still they waited.

Suddenly it came, the notes of a Stirland hunting horn drowned almost immediately by crashing blasts. Von Grunwald's falconets, Otto assumed. Lutyens was on his feet and skidding down the slope. Otto rose but almost tripped over his own stiff legs. Cursing, he plunged after the pistolier. The gorge now echoed with shouting men and neighing horses. On the right there was a continuous cracking as the hackbut men rained fire down on the unfortunate Bretonnians.

Otto was dimly conscious of other men charging downhill but through the tangle of trees and boulders he could see little. He tripped again, rolled and scrambled up. The noise all seemed to be ahead of him now. He skidded on towards the shouting and clash of fighting but was brought up on the edge of a crag far too high to jump. Down through the greenery he could catch glimpses of combat. Cursing again, he tried to make his way around the top of the crag.

There was a great crashing sound and a blood-stained figure appeared, struggling up through the trees. Otto stared into the wide eyes of a young Bretonnian squire. The squire fumbled with his bow. Otto raised his wheel lock and pulled the trigger. Nothing! Blast it! He hadn't cocked the weapon. The squire had an arrow nocked as Otto, yelling with frustration, hurled the pistol at him. The heavy weapon hit the youth full in the face and with a cry he staggered back. Otto, sword drawn now, lunged after him but the squire had tripped on a rock. The man clutched vainly at the branches, and screaming, fell over the crag. Otto bent to retrieve his pistol. His hands shook slightly as he wound back the lock. Sigmar! What kind of war was this?



WHEN OTTO FINALLY burst out of the thick undergrowth at the edge of the road he could scarcely believe his eyes. A heaving mass of mounted men had been hemmed in against the river by the Empire forces. Molders's men were scrambling over a mounting wall of dead horses and men to get at the Bretonnians, who seemed scarcely to be putting up a fight at all. Some of the pistoliers were lifting spears from their dead enemies, that they might better goad the seething whirl of panic-stricken men and horses towards the torrent gushing behind them. Otto, horror struck, just stood and stared, his head ringing with the shrieks of the dying men and horses, the reports of pistols and the strident cries of the pistoliers and their local allies. This butchery could not be battle! How could a man of honour fight like this?

Further up the path, the situation was different. The hackbut men were well protected by the crags that lined the road at that point and could fire down on their opponents almost with impunity. This very protection, however, meant that they could not press the Bretonnians so closely, and amongst the milling crowd a more purposeful wedge of cavalry was being formed. A leader of authority was gathering his most experienced knights and rallying them to attempt a break out back along the road. In the confined space and press of men there was scant room to use their lances, never mind charge, but with determination born of hardened experience and desperation they fought their way along the road. Otto could see the line of Empire troops buckle. Shaken into action, he rushed to aid them.

'Sigmar and the Empire!' he yelled, entering the fray.

Almost at once he was in trouble. Knocked backwards by a blow from a lance shaft swung like a club, he

narrowly escaped the flailing hooves of a knight's horse. The pistolier next to him was not so lucky and a hoof glanced off his burgonet bringing him to his knees. Seemingly frozen, Otto realised the felled pistolier was Captain Molders. With what seemed like unearthly slowness, Otto watched the knight raise the brass-bound lance haft. He recognised the arms on the surcoat as those of the Duke of Boncenne, himself. A wheel lock flashed; with amazement, Otto realised that it was he himself who had fired. The shot missed the Duke but felled his mount. The world sped up once more as Otto, consumed with rage, charged his foe.

The Duke's horsemanship was superb and he was out of his stirrups and saddle and leaping to his feet even before his dead mount had crashed to earth. He flung the broken lance at the still reeling Molders, knocking him flat. Then he swept out his sword and leapt at Otto.

'Base cur!' the young Empire noble cried as he aimed a vicious thrust at the man's head. 'Are you warrior or charlatan to resort to such trickery?'

The Duke was a skilled and powerful warrior, and he blocked Otto's thrust with ease, riposted and knocked the young noble back. Otto just kept his footing and the Duke, following up his own thrust, slipped in turn. He regained his balance but had to step back and for a moment the two opponents stared at one another. The Duke's face was as blank as the plates of his armour, his hard, dark features hardened yet further by the steel frame of his helm. The thin moustache and thinner lips seemed graven on his visage and, along with the stiff guard the Bretonnian had adopted, gave Otto the momentary but disconcerting impression that he was facing some form of animated, metallic statue.

'Base cur!' Otto repeated. The Duke made no reply but suddenly lunged forward in a lightning attack. Otto did well to turn or dodge the flurry of blows but was unable under this relentless storm to press his own attack. The young noble burnt with righteous indignation

but, even through his fury, he realised the danger of this awesome warrior and the need for calm and concentration. The noise and confusion of the rest of the battle had faded, leaving Otto facing his enemy in a private miniature world as wide only as the stretch of their blades. Otto regained his rhythm but against the power and longer reach of the taller Bretonnian was able only to keep up a stout defence.

As he parried blow after blow, the young noble, lighter armoured though he was, began to be conscious of his waning strength as the strain of the past days caught up with him. The Duke seemed to sense it, too, and pressed his attack even more relentlessly. Thrust followed thrust and Otto was driven back, away from the main action. Using every shred of his skill, Otto turned the attacks and desperately strove to find an opening for his own blade. He was breathing heavily and realised he could not long maintain his defence. Pushed back, step by step, he strove to maintain his concentration on the Bretonnian's lightning blade. Focused on his opponent he failed to see the dip behind him and suddenly pitched backwards, landing winded, his sword clattering away across the pebbles. He stared helplessly up as the Duke, face still impassive, stepped over him, changing his grip in readiness to drive his blade down.

There was a gasp of pain but it was the Duke who cried out as a giant, gauntleted fist smashed into the side of his head from behind. The Bretonnian crashed over and frantically scrabbled for his sword as he stared up at Lutyens, who had pulled a wheel lock from his sash and levelled it at the knight. The shot cracked but flew wide as Otto struggled up and knocked the pistolier's arm aside.

'No, Lutyens, I will finish this... to my code,' the young man panted. Pointing to the fallen Bretonnian with his recovered blade, he put what strength he had into his voice and commanded, 'Rise and defend yourself, de Boncenne!'

The Duke lifted his own sword and rose. His face was still blank but, as he resumed his attack, his thrusts seemed to have lost some of their power. Whether it was due to Lutyens's blow or shock from his young opponent's actions, he was definitely less resolute in his offence.

Otto, despite panting with near exhaustion, realised he had a chance. Desperately he gathered his strength and smashed a thrust aside far harder than he had done before. Feinting quickly, he stepped back a pace and, welding his sword in two hands, swung it around in a great circle, and hewed the head from his enemy with one blow. His face splashed with hot blood, he barely registered his victory. He recovered his swing and raised his sword for another blow, before swaying and collapsing, saved only from toppling over the lifeless body of his enemy by the strong arms of Lutyens.

The huge pistolier dragged Otto to the shelter of some large boulders and prepared to defend him. With the death of the Duke, however, what little fight there had been in the Bretonnians was gone. Some few of the determined knot of men which the Duke had rallied had broken through and spurred back down the road. Some others, lightly equipped squires, had somehow swam across the river and were fleeing away over the hill to the other side, but very few. It had been, as Lutyens had predicted, butchery.

Otto gradually came to his senses. He was propped against a boulder and looking out on a river where a raft of drowned men and horses had jammed against jutting rocks. Struggling to recall what had happened he turned to the bank and saw hackbut men laughing, already stripping the dead.

He looked himself up and down. He was drenched with blood and wondered vaguely if it was his own. He felt a sudden rush of weakness and leant back against the warm stone, staring down at his bloodied sword.

Gradually, Otto remembered his struggle with the Duke and looked to where the crumpled body of his foe lay.

So this was victory! So much for honour!

Dazed, he struggled to stand up, leaning heavily on his sword. He remembered Molders and Lutyens and wondered what had happened to them.

He found them sitting by the river, Lutyens bathing his captain's badly bruised head with his soaking neckerchief. Molders looked pale and rather dazed but otherwise fine; at any rate, his chin was still thrust firmly forward. Lutyens looked up, grinning again; action obviously improved his spirits. Addressing Otto, the big pistolier said, 'You look more stunned than the captain and your head is intact!'

Otto slumped onto a rock, shrugged and gestured weakly around him with his sword. 'I didn't expect this,' he mumbled.

Molders met his eyes and suddenly, in spite of his pop-eyes and spade beard, he seemed less ridiculous to Otto. The captain said softly, 'My first battle wasn't what I expected either.'

'I have been so wrong,' the young noble went on. 'So many mistakes!' He sat down facing Molders. 'You have done the Empire a great service, Captain Molders. And you, Lutyens, you've now saved my life twice and I have never even thanked you. How dishonourable!'

'Dishonourable?' Molders asked. 'There is more honour in a man admitting his errors and facing them, than in his battling a hundred foes. I owe you my life and the Graf will be proud of you. No, sir; your honour is intact.'

'Yes,' agreed Lutyens, stepping over and thumping Otto on the back, making him wince. 'You fought by your code, remember?'

The blond giant paused and looked Otto in the eyes. 'I think you will always fight by your code,' he stated seriously.

Then stepping back, he added with a guffaw, 'But in spite of that, we'll make a soldier of you yet!' ●

## DARE YOU BRAVE THE



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Most esteemed architect,

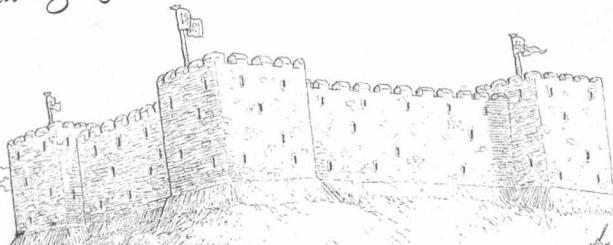
Kristheim Keep is an integral part of the Empire's defences. Its location, nestled in a bend of the Upper Reik, affords control of the important trade route to Black Fire Pass. The current structure is over three hundred years old, and our blessed Emperor has decreed that it should be strengthened to withstand the severest assault.

My Chief Advisor Sigismund Helmsreik has recommended, despite my natural inclinations, that I look even beyond the breadths of the Empire for the most notable castle engineers.

As one of the following selected personages - Sir Guillaume de Ambergris of Gisorenx, Snorri Stonebeard of Karaz-a-Karak, and Helmut Schadenkopf of Nuln - you are invited to submit plans for the development of Kristheim Keep.

As each of you is an expert in your individual field, I expect to see those features for which you are most noted, and eagerly await your proposals for this grand project.

Kristheim Keep as it currently stands.

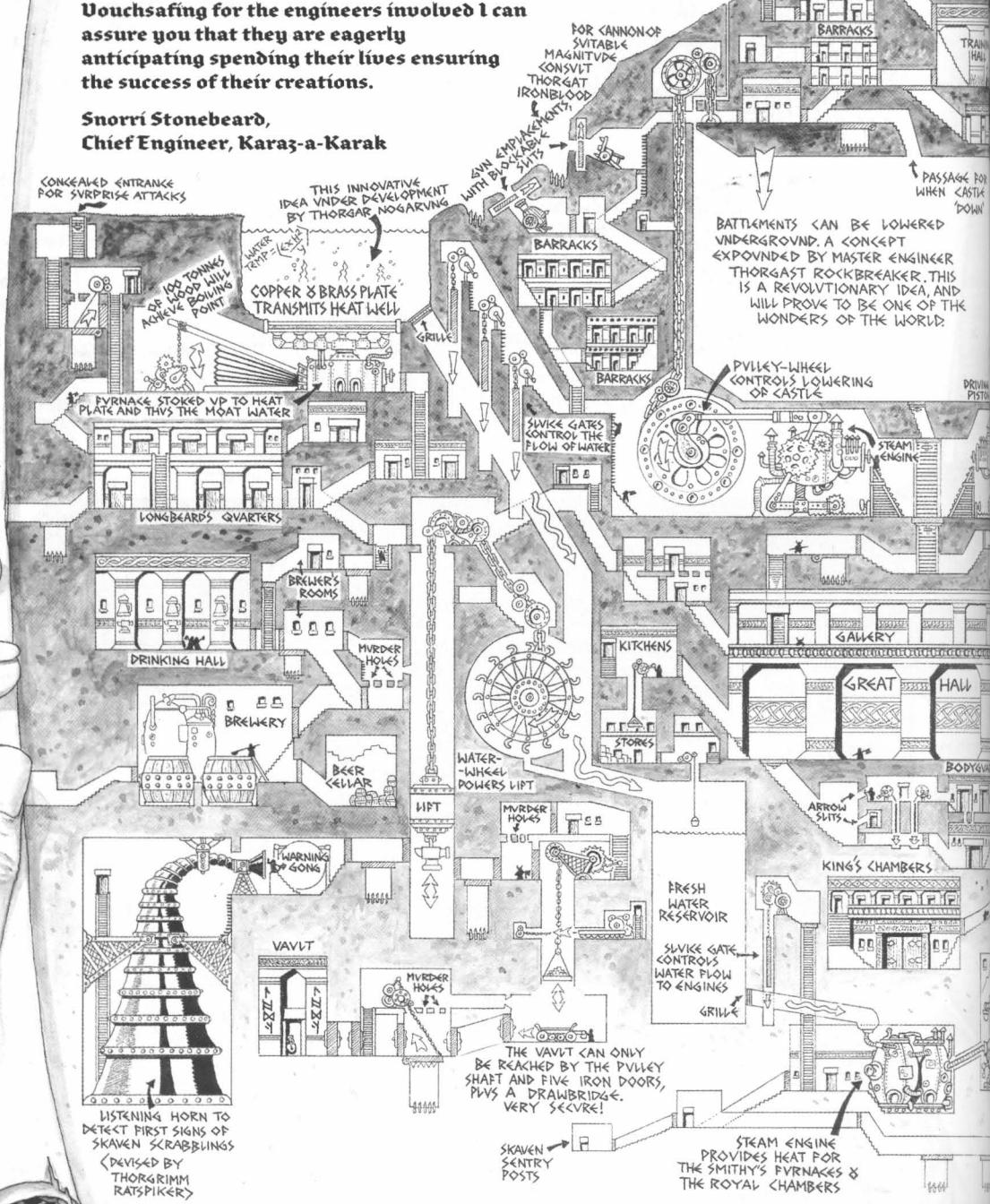


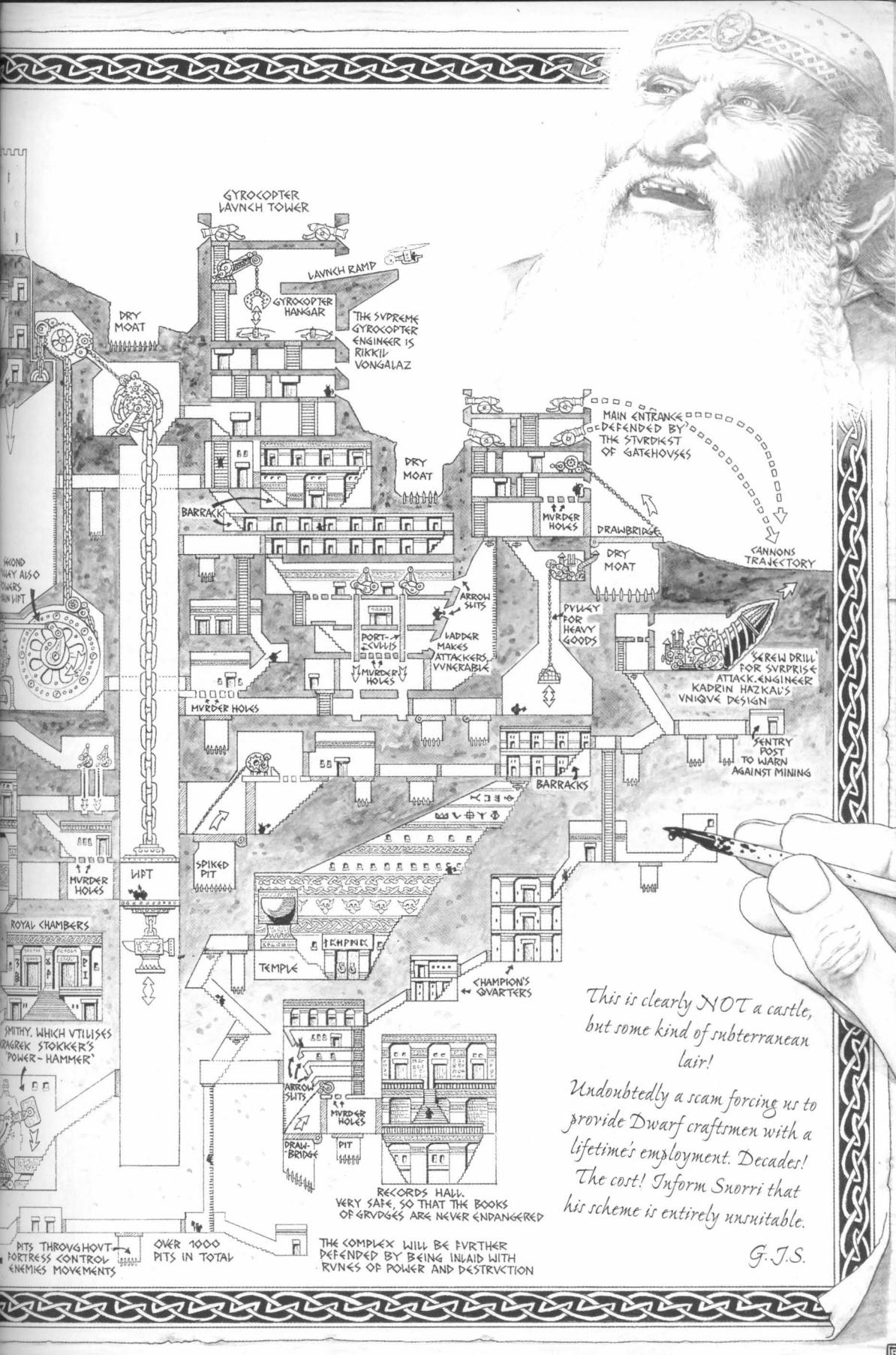
## Greetings Count,

The plans outlined on this page represent the potential for the finest Dwarfish workings in the world, and will provide the Emperor a level of invulnerability unmatched in the Empire.

The task will be accomplished using only the finest Dwarf workers who are used to dedicating decades of service to achieve the highest quality of workmanship. The design includes a number of innovative features. Vouchsafing for the engineers involved I can assure you that they are eagerly anticipating spending their lives ensuring the success of their creations.

**Snorri Stonebeard,**  
**Chief Engineer, Karaz-a-Karak**





This is clearly *NOT* a castle,  
but some kind of subterranean  
lair!

Undoubtedly a scam forcing us to  
provide Dwarf craftsmen with a  
lifetime's employment. Decades!  
The cost! Inform Snorri that  
his scheme is entirely unsuitable.

G.J.S.

GYROCOPTER LAUNCH TOWER  
LAUNCH RAMP  
GYROCOPTER HANGAR  
THE SUPREME GYROCOPTER  
ENGINEER IS  
RIKKIL VONGALAZ

DRY MOAT

SECOND WAY ALSO  
OWNS  
HORN WIT

MURDER HOLES

BARRACK

DRY MOAT

MAIN ENTRANCE  
DEFENDED BY  
THE STURDIEST  
OF GATEHOUSES

MURDER HOLES

ARROW SLOTS

HADDER MAKES  
ATTACKERS VUNGRABLE

PORT CULLIS

MURDER HOLES

PULLEY  
FOR  
HEAVY  
GOODS

DRY MOAT

CANNONS  
TRAJECTORY

SCREW DRILL  
FOR SURPRISE  
ATTACK. ENGINEER  
KADRIN HAZKAU'S  
UNIQUE DESIGN

ENTRY  
POST  
TO WARN  
AGAINST MINING

SPiked PIT

TEMPLE

CHAMPION'S QUARTERS

ROYAL CHAMBERS

SMITHY, WHICH UTILISES  
GREGK STOKKER'S  
POWER-HAMMER

RECORDS HALL.  
VERY SAFE, SO THAT THE BOOKS  
OF GRYGDGES ARE NEVER ENDANGERED

PITS THROUGHOUT  
FORTRESS CONTROL  
ENEMIES MOVEMENTS

OVER 1000  
PITS IN TOTAL

THE COMPLEX WILL BE FURTHER  
DEFENDED BY BEING INFILLED WITH  
RUINES OF POWER AND DESTRUCTION

Your Imperial Highness,

It is a great honour for me to propose the following new construction of Kristheim castle. It has long been acknowledged in Bretonnia that the most pleasing appearance reflects best on a Lord's honour.

This design adopts that thesis whole-heartedly, and whilst the original keep would have to be removed in order to create more suitable foundations, the result would be both impressive in its elegance, and practicality. The grand windows,

**RULE 1:**  
A TOWER  
DEDICATED TO OUR  
LADY OF THE LAKE  
SHALT BE THE TALLEST.

**RULE 2:**  
THE LORD'S  
TOWER SHALL BE  
THE 2<sup>ND</sup> TALLEST.

**RULE 3:**  
THE LADIES  
SHALT HAVE THEIR  
GARDENS IN  
WHICH TO TAKE  
THEIR LEAVE.

GARDENS.

RIVERSIDE GALLERY;  
SO THAT THE LADIES  
MAYBE SOOTHED BY  
THE CALMING MOTION  
OF THE FLOWING  
RIVER REIK.

STABLING  
YARD.

KNIGHTS,  
INNER WARD.

VIEWING  
GALLERY.

CLIMBING YARD.

LORD'S  
WINDOW.

KNIGHT'S.

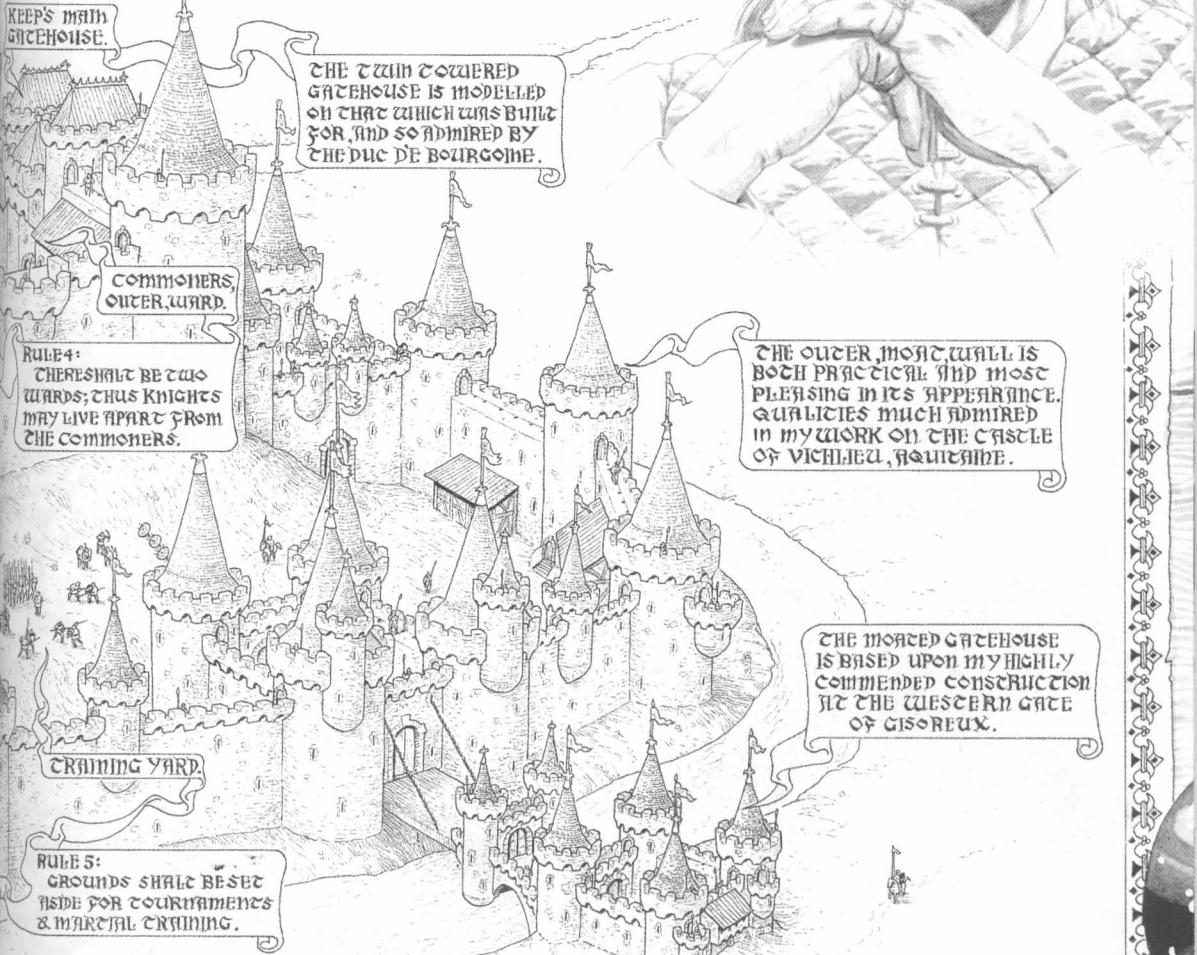
COMMONER'S.

STATUS MUST BE REFLECTED IN ALL ASPECTS  
OF THE CASTLE'S ARCHITECTURE. THIS IS  
MOST DEMONSTRABLE IN THE USE OF GLASS.

and tapering towers will provide a splendid situation in which to court the fairest Lady.

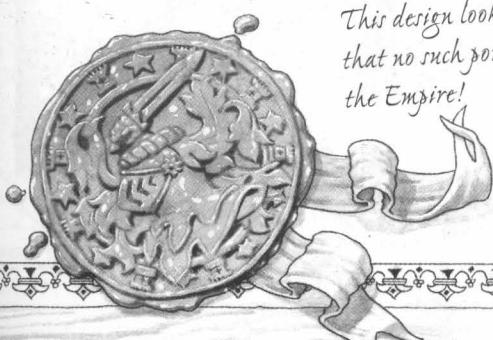
I welcome the opportunity to grace your with a splendid fortress befitting your station, and future honours.

Your Humble Servant,  
Sir Guillame d'Ambergris,  
Master Architect to the Court of King Louis



Kristheim Keep has stood for three centuries, and now he says tear it down because it cannot support a tower! The impudence of the fellow. This design looks all show and incredibly expensive. Tell d'Ambergris that no such pompously preposterous castle will ever grace the lands of the Empire!

G. J.S.



## view from southern approach.

Graf Jakob Sudetten,

I believe the best way to expand upon Kristheim's design is to develop the natural strengths by construction of a deep moat cut through the existing mound. Whilst this would prove costly, this would be offset by the design of the Curtain wall, which contains a number of highly economic features.

A second wall to encompass the Keep is also recommended. This will create a total of seven gatehouses to breach before the keep is achieved from the landward approach. A series of independent towers will cover the river approach.

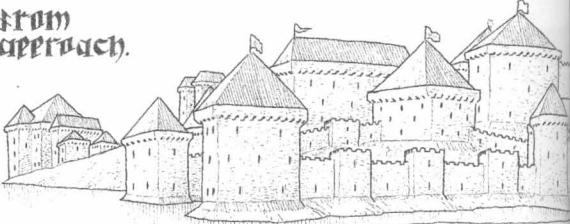
I trust this suggestion meets with your Lordship's approval.

Your Loyal Subject,  
Helmut Schadenkopf,  
Imperial Engineers School, Nuln

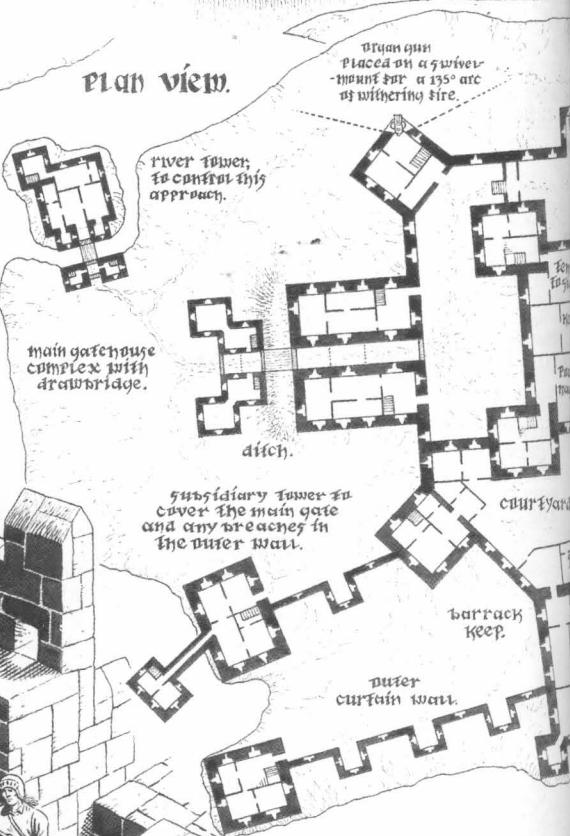
The open-backed tower design is a cheap and efficient way to fortify the curtain walls.

access along the rampart is restricted to a plank walk-way. this can be removed, and thus limit an enemy attack to a single section of the wall.

The walls will all be built with 'pulley holes'. this means that prepared timbering can be quickly assembled into a series of overhanging battlements.



## plan view.



Bryan gun  
placed on a garrison  
mount for a 135° arc  
of withering fire.

River tower:  
to control this  
approach.

Main gatehouse  
complex with  
drawbridge.

Subsidiary tower to  
cover the main gate  
and any breaches in  
the outer wall.

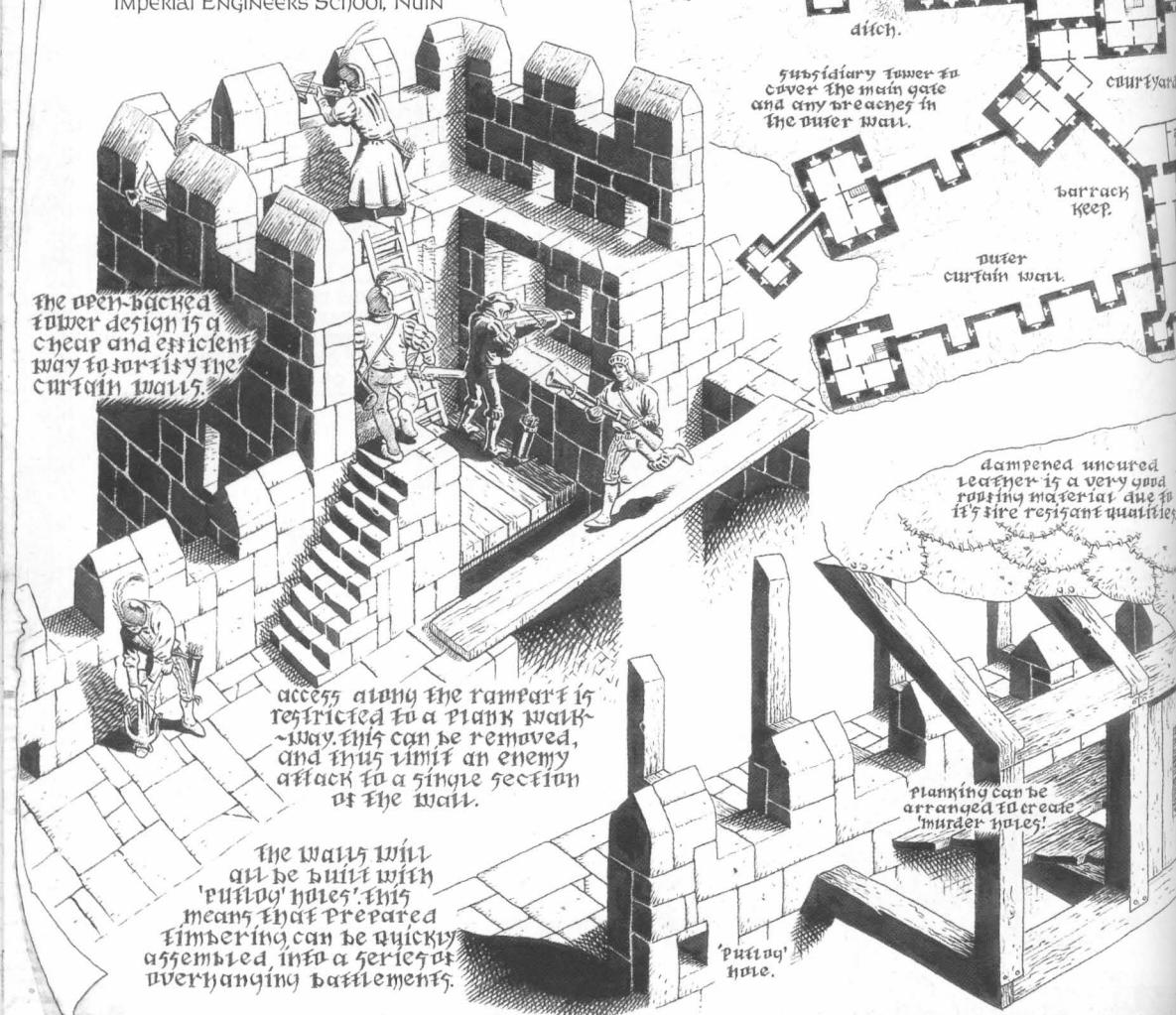
barrack  
keep

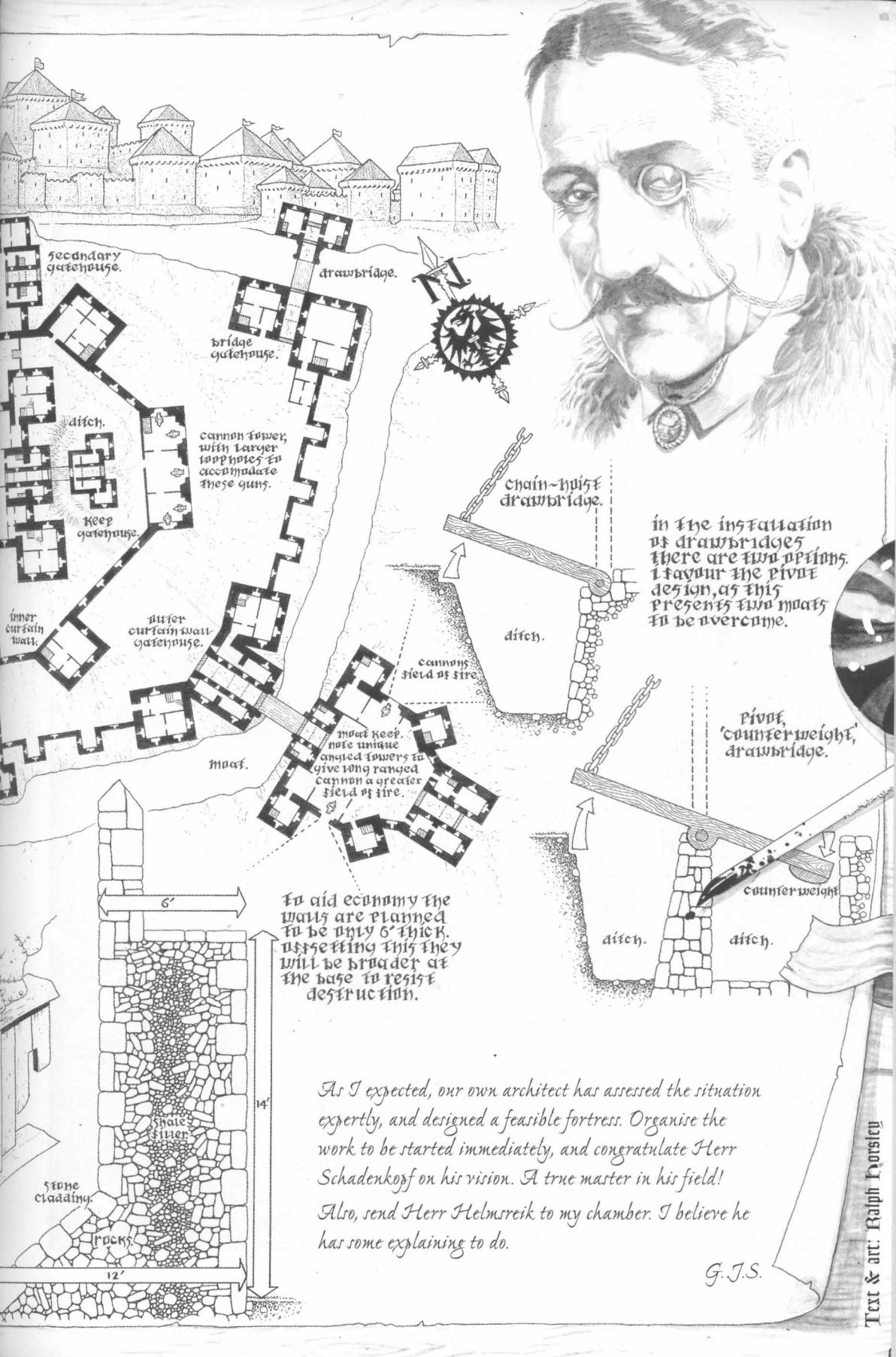
Outer  
curtain wall.

Dampened uncured  
leather is a very good  
roofing material due to  
its fire resistant qualities.

planking can be  
arranged to create  
'murder holes'.

'pulley'  
hole.







# HELLBREAK

• BY BEN COUNTER •

'YOU WILL NEVER know, scum,' the mechanically translated voice hissed in Commissar von Klas's ear, 'just how lucky you are!'

An unseen hand thrust him up the last few stairs, out of the darkness and into the searing glare of the arena. He stumbled in the sudden light and slipped, hitting the coarse sand face-first, scouring a layer of skin off his cheek. From all around him there rose a cackling cheer. He looked up and a terror shot through him that his training couldn't banish.

An area the size of a landing field spread out before him, its sandy floor streaked with crescents of maroon that could only be the bloody traces of those who had come before him. Around the edge of the arena was a ring of spikes as tall as a man, with a head impaled on each tip. There were heads of men and Orks, the long slender faces of Eldar, the twisted alien features of a hundred different species.

Beyond them, the amphitheatre rose, huge and dark, forged of black iron into forms which seemed to have been pulled, fully formed, from a madman's imagination. Wicked spikes and curving galleries formed the mouths of leering faces; immense claws of iron held up the private boxes of the elite. The whole edifice rose to join the myriad black pinnacles and spires of Commorragh which speared upwards, a mockery of beauty, to puncture a sky the colour of a wound gone bad.

But that was not the worst of it. As von Klas hauled himself to his feet, feeling his muscles complaining with the sudden release from the steel bonds which had held them for so long, he felt their eyes upon him, and he heard their laughter. The audience of Eldar renegades, many hundreds of thousands strong, sat in great serried ranks, their pale alien faces shining like lanterns against the purples and blacks of their clothing. Silver blades gleamed everywhere, and he could hear them talking to one another in low voices – perhaps

wagering on whether he would live or die, or just mocking a man who didn't know he was dead yet. In the prime position, right at the edge of the arena, sat a great dignitary, with a face that even from this distance von Klas could tell was as long and cruel as any he had ever seen. His purple robe only half-concealed ceremonial armour with great crescent-shaped shoulder guards. The dignitary was surrounded by a bodyguard who stood stone-still and carried spears tipped with bright silver blades, and any number of hangers-on and courtiers lounged nearby.

Von Klas had barely time to take all this in when the dignitary raised one slender hand to the crowd, who screamed their approval with a deafening rising screech. Von Klas looked around him to see what had just been signalled – but he was alone in the vast arena. The doorway through which he had been pitched had sunk back into the sand behind him.

Something flickered in the corner of his eye. In the time it took him to turn and face it, it had got much closer. As a storm of thoughts and fears rushed through his Commissar's mind, his old, trained instincts took over and he tensed his aching muscles for the fight.



THE HUMAN HAD maybe a second and a half to see the Wych as she backflipped and cartwheeled her way across the sand towards it. She wore armour only to display her body, which was lithe and supple to an extent which no human could match. Her long red-black hair flowed out in a stormy trail behind her as she moved, along with the glistening metallic net that she held in one hand. In the other, twirling like a rotor blade, was a halberd, as long as she was tall and tipped with a broad, wickedly curved blade.

In his luxuriously fitted box at the front of the audience, the Eldar who had signalled, Archon Kypselon, leaned across to Yae, who reclined next to him, her long, slim body draped over the seat, showing off her snake-like muscles. The leader of the Cult of Rage, Kypselon's most valuable ally, Yae looked every bit as formidable as her reputation, her dark hair braided with lengths of silver chain and her glassy, emerald eyes enough to intimidate any lesser Eldar into submission.

'I hear this is one of the finest of your Wyches,' he said off-handedly. 'Rather wasted on a single creature.'

'Perhaps, my Archon,' she replied. 'But I hear it is one of their ruling class. It might provide some sport. They can breed them remarkably tough.'

Out in the arena, the human turned, holding its body low and hands high preparing for the Wych's first strike. Through the blur of violent motion it would just be able to make out her face, twisted with exertion and hate, her eyes burning with the sacred narcotics which coursed joyfully through her veins. The delicately pointed Eldar ears and large eyes would do nothing to offset the base savagery.

'I hope she is as fine as they say,' Kypselon continued. 'The Kabal of the Broken Spine needs fine warriors. There are others who would take away the authority that I have earned.'

'You know the Cult of Rage are with you,' Yae smiled. 'Power and wisdom such as yours is enough to secure our loyalty.'

Kypselon smirked indulgently. He had been around long enough to know such words were nothing more than a cipher on Commoragh – he had seen enough Eldar die by treachery, his included, to know that. But Yae's Wyches were truly vital to him. Uergax and the Kabal of the Blade's Edge were threatening to shatter the delicate savagery of his territory. But those were matters for his court. He tried to concentrate on the entertainment at hand; it had, after all, been put on specifically for him. Such honour was really born of fear, of course, but on Commoragh fear and honour were much the same thing.

The Wych let out a piercing shriek of pleasure and rage as she whipped the

halberd back over her shoulder, leaping high into the air and preparing to bring the blade down on the human in a shining arc.

Yae gave a sudden, sharp gasp of excitement, like a child, sitting up with a glint of rapture in her eyes. Kypselon smiled – an old Eldar like him could still appreciate the simple pleasures. A dead human was a pleasure indeed.

The man drove one foot into the arena's sand and thrust itself sideways, away from the shimmering blur of the Wych's limbs, just as her blade scythed down in a silver-white blur past its face. Anyone else would have lost their balance and pitched into the bloodsoaked sand, but the Wych somersaulted elegantly, landing on her feet and turning on a heel to face her quarry. But the human was ready too, and quicker than most men could, it drove the palm of one hand into the Wych's face, snapping her head back, splitting her nose open in a vermillion spray.

There was a dark, displeased hiss from the galleries. Kypselon heard low obscenities muttered around him. Yae stood up, her eyes still shining with glee – for a true Wych loves combat whoever wins. But the rest of the audience were not so happy.

The Wych in the arena rolled onto her front in a heartbeat, ready to rise and face the upstart human, but it stamped a booted foot into the small of her back, pinning her to the ground.

'Kill it!' yelled an incensed spectator. 'Kill the animal!'

A hundred other voices joined in, rising to a roar – that became a cheer as the Wych caught one of the man's legs with her own and tipped it sprawling on its back. She sprang up for the kill, her net forgotten, ready to swipe off its head with her halberd.

The audience noticed before she did: she was no longer holding the weapon. Her opponent was. Before she had time to respond, it drove the blade towards her. She held up the net in front of her neck and face, knowing its metallic strands would parry the blow and keep her head on her shoulders.

But the human was not aiming for her neck, for it did not care for the elegant decapitation that was the most graceful of murders. Instead, the blade went right

through her stomach and out between the Wych's shoulders. As her lifeblood gouted upwards, she looked unutterably surprised, still coming to realise that her weapon had been stolen.

The man drew out the blade and pulled itself to its feet. The Wych slumped to the ground, amidst a growing crimson stain upon the sand.

The yells from the audience became a wordless howl of rage that rang violently around the amphitheatre. Yae was still on her feet, breathing in sharp, shallow gasps, her eyes wide.

Kypselon rose to stand at her side.

'Never fear,' he whispered to her under the din, 'This is as grave an insult to me as it is to you. I shall have the human given to the Haemonculi. Then I shall deliver the skin to you once I am sure it can take no more pain.'

Yae did not answer. Her eyes burned and a snarl grew on her face. With a silent gesture, Kypselon ordered his black-armoured bodyguards to fetch the man and remove the body of the Wych.

Seeing the Dark Eldar approaching, the man dropped the Wych's halberd, perhaps expecting a quick despatch as a reward for its victory. The crowd continue to howl its derision as one of the warriors knocked it unconscious with the butt of his spear, and the body was dragged away to a fate that it could never have imagined.

It was always the same with aliens, Kypselon reflected. They are simply too stupid to realise when they would be better off dead.



THE ROOM WAS mercilessly lit by a bright glowing ceiling. Two of the alien warriors stood guard at the back wall. The floor was of bare metal, sloping towards a drain in the centre through which his bodily fluids were supposed to drain away. The walls were hung with skins, complete human pelts, presumably the finest of those taken by the torturer over the years. Tattoos had been favoured, and von Klas could recognise the regimental insignia and devotional versus inscribed on the skins: Catachan, Stratix, Jurn, even

his own Hydraphur. The words of the Ecclesiarchy in intricate script. Primitive tribal scars. Even a green-brown Ork hide with kill tallies gouged into the chest.

He looked down at himself. He was not bound. Presumably they thought the fear alone would keep him here. They were probably right.

'I won't die,' von Klas said aloud, every word like a hammer blow to his aching head. 'I'm a difficult man to kill.'

The warriors said nothing. The door between them opened with a hiss, and the torturer shuffled in. Von Klas had heard rumours about the torture artists of the renegade Eldar, but it was only now that he started to believe them.

The Eldar looked at von Klas with eyes which had long since sunken out of sight, the sockets now just deep, ravaged tunnels. His skin was a dead blue-grey, stretched and striated by age and untold torment, the lips drawn back like a corpse's, the nose crushed and misshapen, the scalp hairless and paper-thin so white bone showed through.

The robes that covered his shuffling frame were fashioned from skins too, and he had picked out the best designs for them: rare metallic tattoos, the elaborate medical scars of an Astartes veteran. From a belt of gnarled hide, perhaps from an Ogryn, hung a multitude of implements, scalpels and syringes, strange arcane devices for lifting the skin or teasing out nerve endings like splinters from a finger. There was something else, too, an articulated silver gauntlet with a medical blade tipping each digit, so sharp their edges caught the acidic light and scraped incandescent curves in the air.

Behind him was a slave, a young human female, dressed in rags with long, lank, once-blonde hair, who scampered along behind the torturer like a fearful pet. She bore few obvious scars, the torturer needing her alive and lucid, since she acted as his interpreter.

The torturer hissed some words in his own language, a tongue as dry as snake-skin slithering between the exposed teeth.

'Verredaek, Haemonculus to Lord Archon Kypselon of the Broken Spine Kabal,' began the translator in hesitant Imperial Gothic, 'wishes his... his subject

to know that he does not rely on mindless devices to perform his art. Some Haemonculi employ cowardly machines which produce mediocre results in the art. Verredaek will only use the ancient talents passed on by the torturers of the Broken Spine. He is proud of this.'

Von Klas stood up, still aching. He was tall, as tall as the guards and far taller than the shrivelled Haemonculus. 'I am not going to die here. I am going to kill every single one of you myself.' He kept his voice level, as if he was instructing his own men. 'I might not see it, and I might not even be there. But I will kill you.'

The terrified girl stammered his words back in the Eldar language. Through her, Verredaek replied, 'It is good that you do not give up. The bodies and souls of creatures who do not believe themselves to be on the edge of death have long... fascinated me. The first cut will be sweet indeed.'

Without any discernible motion, a blade as long as an index finger, so sharp it disappeared when turned edge-on, appeared in Verredaek's hand. The torturer stepped forward, the skins of his robes hissing as they rubbed together. 'You will know fear, but know also that it is not in vain you die. The art of pain continues through souls such as yours, their agony distilled and passed on, and one day you shall become part of a much greater work.'

Von Klas looked from the knife to Verredaek's sightless eye-sockets, and saw his mistake. This was how he managed to torture his victims without strapping them down or tying them up. Those desperately empty caverns, the ridges of desiccated skin picked out by the harsh light, seemed to bolt him to the ground and drain his limbs of strength.

His superiors had decided that von Klas was officer material, but he had never been a greatly distinguished officer, never led charges that shattered armies, never held the line against awesome odds. He had the medals they give Commissars as a matter of course, and nothing more. He might have been in effective command of twenty thousand men, but in the Imperium that made him one amongst a million.

But he had survived the battle in the arena. He had proved to be something special to his captors, so much so that he

had been given to Verredaek as a punishment. And now he would be something again. He would survive this, too. He didn't care if it was unknown. He would still do it.

For a second, Verredaek's hypnotic aura was broken as von Klas made his vow to survive. He closed his eyes, and his body was his own again. He would not get a second chance.

With all his strength, he punched, low and hard. His hand hit spongy flesh and drove deeper. The Haemonculus gasped in astonishment. The Commissar grabbed Verredaek so he would not fall, and spun both of them around, just as the Eldar guards began to shoot. One shot sprayed Verredaek across the back, his skin splitting and bursting like a rotten fruit under the assault of a hundred splinters of crystal. The second caught von Klas on the shoulder, a glancing blow but one that drove a dozen splinters deep into the muscle.

The translator screamed and scampered across to the far side of the room, wrapping her arms around her head so she couldn't see.

Von Klas drove Verredaek's body forward into one guard, smashing the Eldar into the back wall, knocking him senseless. The second Eldar hesitated. It was enough. Von Klas scrabbled at Verredaek's belt until he felt the cold steel of his gauntlet. He thrust his hand into it, feeling the woven metal mesh close around his hand. With one motion he snapped it off the tendon that bound it to the belt and thrust it deep into the second guard's chest. The Eldar let out a muffled cry, then slumped lifelessly to the floor.

Von Klas stood up once more, Verredaek's limp body sliding off his shoulders and down the wall. The first Eldar lay motionless against the back wall where he had been rammed. He might have been dead, but behind the lifeless jade of the alien's helmet's eyes von Klas couldn't be sure. The second was certainly dead, though, his blood running down into the drain at the room's centre.

Verredaek shifted slightly and suddenly there was an alien gun pointing at von Klas, slender and strange, held in a gnarled blue-grey hand. Without thinking, von Klas

slashed the torturer's gauntlet downwards as the Eldar turned his head to aim. The blades swiped cleanly through his face, slicing the withered skin to ribbons. The Haemonculus slumped to the floor at last.

He had been difficult to kill. But then so am I, thought Commissar von Klas.

He considered taking one of the guard's rifles, but he would have needed two hands to fire it and he wanted to keep hold of the razor-gauntlet. And the splinters that had hit him, though they were sending occasional flashes of pain through his muscles, had still left him alive. Not very efficient, he thought coldly. The torturer's gun might prove more useful. He prised it from Verredaek's dead hands. It was oddly light, and very strange to look at, with a barrel so slender only a needle, surely, could be fired out.

He turned to the translator slave still cowering in the corner behind one of the hanging skins.

'You coming?' he asked. 'We can escape from here if we hurry.'

The translator didn't seem to understand him, as if she wasn't used to having Imperial spoken directly to her and wasn't sure how to respond. She shook her head and redoubled her efforts to hide from him. Von Klas decided to leave her.

The door through which Verredaek had entered opened with a simple touch of his hand on a panel set into the wall. Beyond it, the corridors were made of the same polished metal, but bent and buckled into strange shapes, as if the whole place had been picked up and twisted by a giant. Von Klas jogged down the corridor, mind buzzing, trying to work out if the place had a pattern to it, one part of his brain keeping watch for signs of more guards.

He came to a row of cells, four of them, the doors again opening easily with a press of their inset panels. Behind the first was a human, an Imperial Guardsman, still dressed in his grime-grey uniform, his head shaved and his face aged beyond his years.

The man blinked in the sudden light, for the cells were pitch black inside, and looked up at what must have been von Klas's silhouette. 'You're one of us,' he said, surprised into stupidity.

'Come on. We're getting out,' von Klas replied.

The Guardsman smiled sadly and shook his head. 'They'll be here any moment. We won't stand a chance.'

'That's an order, soldier. I'm a Commissar and I've got scores to settle. If I say we're leaving then we're out of here already. Now move!'

The Guardsman shrugged and shuffled unsteadily out of the cell – prisoners weren't manacled, Verredaek must have thought he was above that. Von Klas hurried to open the other three cells.

'Sir! Trouble!' yelled the Guardsman. A sketchy reflection of the approaching Eldar warriors shimmered on the metal wall and splinters began shattering against the walls.

As three other Guardsmen emerged, stumbling and confused, von Klas levelled Verredaek's pistol to defend them. He fired at the first hint of purple and silver that came round the corner, tiny darts leaving a glittering trail as they raced for their target.

There was a strangled cry and the first renegade Eldar pitched forward, clutching at the shattered mask of his helmet. As his cries became garbled howls, the warrior convulsed, his body splitting and twisting as it was ripped apart. Hot blood and shards of bone spattered and ricocheted across the walls. The Guardsmen – two in sand-coloured uniforms, Tallarn maybe; the last in the remains of a dark red uniform that could have been Adeptus Mechanicus – ducked back into the cells for cover. Von Klas might not have understood the Eldar tongue but he knew fear when he heard it, and that was what he heard now, as the remaining Eldar guards howled in fright or pain and fell back.

'Move!' von Klas said quickly. 'They're scared of us now!'

The first man he had released darted forwards and grabbed two rifles from where the guards had dropped them, throwing one to one of the Tallarn. After a moment to scrutinise the controls, they started pumping fire back down the corridor, before hurrying after the others.

Von Klas and his men – they were surely his men now, his unit – hurried away from the cells, von Klas leading, the two armed men jogging backwards with their rifles ready to offer covering fire. All the while von Klas could hear voices, the guards

calling for help, trying to organise a pursuit, or perhaps just cursing the Guardsmen in their vile alien tongue.

The labyrinth of prison corridors rolled out in front of them in ever more tormented designs. As they stumbled along, von Klas was beginning to believe that surviving might be impossible after all, even for a Commissar. But no more guards came. It was not the guards that were supposed to stop prisoners escaping – it was the torment and brutality that were meant to break their will. Von Klas and his men passed the threshold of scarred iron, and emerged, breathless, bloody and exhausted, hearts racing, into the open air, the bowels of Verredaek's torture machine behind them.

But von Klas knew with an officer's instinct that they were not safe. Because they had only freed themselves in order to enter the Dark Eldar world-city of Commorragh.



VERREDAEK LOOKED OLDER, thought Kypselon, older even than the shattered, wizened specimen that first came into the Archon's employ. But, of course, it could just be the vile old creature's shredded face. It had been a long time since Kypselon had seen Verredaek – not since the Haemonculus had first retreated into his underground complex to pursue the art of torturer at his command, in fact.

Verredaek shuffled pathetically across the floor of Kypselon's throne room, across the milky marble shot though with amethyst veins. He looked small and feeble under the gaze of the three hundred or so Eldar warriors who stood around the room's edge, weapons held ready, constantly at attention.

'Fallen One's teeth, what happened to him?' slurred Exuma, Kypselon's Dracon, who was lounging in a seat held aloft by anti-grav motors so he didn't have to walk anywhere. A quietly gurgling medical array pumped a steady steam of narcotics into Exuma's blood.

'He failed,' Kypselon replied with feeling. When he rose from his black iron throne,

the wide window behind him cast the shadow of his shoulder guards across Verredaek in two great crescents. The torturer seemed to shrink, and though his eyes were hidden, Kypselon could detect fear in the dark sockets.

'Verredaek, you will recall that when you first entered my services, I had my servants take a little of your blood.' Kypselon's deep voice echoed faintly off the high, vaulted ceiling and purple-draped marble walls.

'Yethhh, Archon,' Verredaek replied, his speech impeded by his newly-forked tongue.

'I still have what I took. The reason I keep it, and that of all my followers, is to make real the notion that I own you. You are mine, you are a part of my territory, just like the streets and palaces. Just like my temple. The price of belonging to the Broken Spine is total subservience to me. Yet you failed to carry out my commands.'

Verredaek tried to speak, but he too had been alive longer than most on Commorragh, and he knew that words would not save him here.

'I ordered you to bring the human here, skinless and broken, so I could watch him die. This you failed to do. The reasons are irrelevant. You failed. By definition, being a possession of mine, you must be discarded.'

Kypselon shot a glance at the front row of Warriors and four of them strode forwards, grabbing Verredaek and holding him fast.

The Haemonculus didn't struggle as Yae flipped her lithe body from the shadows into the centre of the room. Her eyes and smile flashed, as she drew twin hydraknives. They turned to lightning bolts in her hands as she danced – and killed.

As Yae twirled and slashed a thousand cuts into Verredaek's body, Kypselon turned to his Dracon. 'What is the situation with the Blade's Edge?'

Exuma looked back with glazed eyes. 'Little has changed, my Archon. Uergax has the Mandrakes, and the Incubi favour him as well. Some remain loyal to us, but what Uergax lacks in territory he makes up with most admirable diplomacy.' The Dracon paused to gasp with pleasure as another bolt of drugs shot through his veins.

Kypselon shook his head. 'It is not good. Uergax may soon crush us as I would wish to crush him. The Blade's Edge covets our corner of Commorragh and if incompetence like this persists he will get it. Yae!'

The Wych span to a halt and let her lacerated handiwork collapse to the floor. 'Archon?'

'The human we wished to see dead is more resourceful than we thought. It is now loose on Commorragh. Find it.'

Yae smiled with genuine relish. 'It is a great honour to perform a task that would give me such pleasure in the name of one so great.'

'No time for blandishments, Yae. Uergax is bleeding us dry and I do not need this creature running loose to complicate matters. I fully expect you to succeed.'

'Yes, lord.'

'And be wary. This one has a colder heart than most. You may go.'

Yae flitted away, as only a Wych could, to fulfil his commands. Kypselon turned to the great window behind him. It was a view of Commorragh, a riot of dark madness and broken spires, bridges that crossed to nothing, mutilated cathedrals to insanity and evil, a planet-wide city at once unfinished and ancient, swarming beneath a glorious swirling thunderstorm sky. And in the centre, obscene, bleached and pale, was Kypselon's temple. A temple to him, because living so long and rising to such power on Commorragh was such an impossible task it might as well be that of a god. A thousand pillars made of thigh bones held up a roof tiled with skulls. Whole skeletons acted out scenes of violation and murder on friezes and pediments.

'Every Eldar, human, Ork, every enemy I have ever killed stands there, Exuma. Every one. My temple is a testament to the fact that I will not give up, not ever. I have carved a path for myself through the very bodies of my foes.'

Exuma allowed himself to drift back into lucidity long enough to reply: 'Archon, none can say that you have failed in anything you have attempted.'

'That is the past. I have risen to power and I will not relinquish it to a boy like Uergax. I am not ashamed of fear, Exuma, even though young upstarts like Uergax and yourself are. And I feel fear now. But I

will use that fear, and my temple will grow.'

Outside, the cancerous rain of Commorragh began to fall.



'IN THE CITY, you need those who want your money or your honour. On the plains, in the desert, you need brothers.' Rahimzadeh of Tallarn was a wiry, intense man, not long a soldier but already well versed in the hot fear and desperation of war. 'Though there are only two of us left, we are brothers still.'

Ibn, the second Tallarn, looked up from the ornate Eldar splinter rifle he was examining. 'You would not understand. On your Hydraphur, a million men live within sight of one another. No room for true brothers.'

Von Klas winced as Scleros, the Lexmechanic, pulled another shard from the Commissar's raw shoulder. It felt like the razor-sharp crystals were doing as much damage coming out as they did going in. 'Brothers or not, we still have a chain of command. I am a Commissar and you are now my men.'

'Why?' Ibn asked with a sneer. 'What good can orders and rank do here?' He waved an arm to indicate their surroundings – a shattered shell of a building, the carcass of some vast cathedral of soaring flutes and arches, now gutted and decrepit. It was deserted, which was why they had stopped here, but they all knew that there were malevolent eyes everywhere on Commorragh and they could soon be found wherever they hid.

'We can get out of here,' the Commissar replied. 'There's a spaceport nearby, close to the temple.'

'Temple? This place has no gods,' Rahimzadeh said. 'Even the Emperor's light is faint upon us here.'

'It is consecrated to the foul leader of this part of the planet. The scum raised a temple to himself. The spaceport's nearby but it's garrisoned. We'd have to occupy the temple, draw in the garrison troops and make a break for the spaceport.'

'Death would claim us all before we reached it,' said Ibn.

'Not all of us. Not if there were enough. Would you rather let them recapture you? They wouldn't let you run away twice. If we try to escape we'll either make it or die trying. Whatever happens then, it's better than skulking here until one of them finds us.'

Rahimzadeh thought for a second. 'What you say is true. I think you are a good man. But we need others.'

'We'll need a whole damn army,' Ibn said.

Von Klas turned around. 'Scleros?'

The Commissar had been right – the tattered dark rust-red uniform was that of the *Adeptus Mechanicus*. Scleros was a Lexmechanic, his brain adapted to allow him to absorb a huge amount of information, produce calculations and battlefield reports. His augmentation was belied by the intricate web of silver tracery surrounding his artificial right eye. 'You said there is a chain of command. As commanding officer, the decision is yours.'

'Fine. And you?'

The fourth Guardsman had said little. His head was shaven and he wore the grey uniform that could be from one of a thousand regiments. 'Sure. Whatever. As long as I get a shot at some of those freaks.'

Von Klas studied the Imperial Guardsman: his hollow eyes, his scowl, the nose that had been broken two or three times. 'What's your name, soldier?'

'Kep. Necromundan Seventh.'

Ibn let out a short, barking laugh. 'Lucky Sevens? The sands do not lie so much. You are Penal Legions, my friend. The tattoo at the top of your arm, they can read it. You have the scar on your wrist where the machine makes your blood mad.'

Kep shrugged and held up his hand. Von Klas could see the scar where a frenzor dispenser had once been implanted. 'Guilty. I am from the First Penal Legion.'

'The First?' Rahimzadeh said with a hint of awe in his voice. 'The Big One?'

'What's your crime?' asked von Klas, his words straining as Scleros removed the last of the Eldar shrapnel.

'Heresy. Third class. Standard practice – if Eldar pirates show up you feed them the Penal Legion. They get their slaves, the Imperium ditches a few more scum, everyone's happy.'

The bruise-coloured clouds above had coagulated. Large, filthy grey raindrops started to fall, grey with the pollutants. Kep and the Tallarn ran, hunched, into a corner of the old cathedral, where some of the roof remained and there was cover.

Von Klas looked round at Scleros, the remaining soldier. The Lexmechanic, as he expected, had no expression. 'You had the surgery?'

The thick rain sent strange trails across the circuitry on Scleros's face. 'Emotional repression protocol, sir. It allows me to deal with information of an ideologically sensitive nature.'

'Thought so. Scleros, you realise that we're never going to get off this planet, don't you?'

'I was unable to understand how we could escape through a spaceport. We would not be able to use a spacecraft, even if we were able to understand Eldar technology. We would be shot down. We can not escape this place.'

'I trust you not to tell the men. This mission's objective does not allow for our survival.'

Scleros held out a hand and let a little of the rain collect in his palm. It swam with grey trails of impurity. 'We should get out of the rain. This could infect us.'

The two headed for shelter, while all around them, the soul of Commorragh seethed for their blood.



**S**YBARITE LAEVEQ gazed down from the gantry at the immense metallic beast, powered by the exertions of the many hundreds of deliciously emaciated human slaves that were chained to its pneumatic limbs. Great clouds of acrid smoke and steam from the huge cauldron of molten metal obscured their faces, and Laeveq felt as if he were striding in the clouds, a god looking down upon the wretches who both feared him and needed him to survive.

The Eldar guard watched as another of them fell, limbs flopping loose as the clanking, screeching steel mill machinery carried on without it, head snapping back

and forth as the machinery threw it about blindly. Soon Laeveq's Eldar would go onto the factory floor and take away the battered corpse and replaced it with another faceless barbarian.

'Sybarite Laeveq,' a hasty voice came through his communicator. 'A problem has presented itself.'

'Elaborate, Xaron.'

'It's Kytellias. She didn't call in on her patrol and we went to find her. Her throat had been slit, ear to ear. Very pretty. Very clean.'

Laeveq cursed his fortune. 'Fugitives. Bring every armed Eldar to me, on the gantry above the main hall. We will sweep this entire factory and disembowel them on top of the machinery so all these brute animals will see the cost of denial.'

'It may not be that simple, Sybarite. Lady Yae has sent word of dangerous escaped arena slaves.'

'Then we will take much reward for bring them in. Send everyone here. Is that understood?'

There was no answer. A dim static crackled where the warrior's voice should have been.

'I said, "Is that understood?" Xaron?'

Nothing. Laeveq looked around him at the web of gantries spanning the great space of the main factory hall. Through the billowing sheets of steam, he could see nothing. He felt suddenly alone.

When Laeveq caught sight of the human figure running towards his position along the gantry, he was sure he could take him. It was a tall and strong man, to be sure, with hair cut close and a muscled torso riven with many old scars. It had found a scissorhand and a stinger pistol from somewhere, too, but it would not be skilled with them.

Laeveq whipped out his own splinter pistol and took pleasure in the aiming, fancying he could take the animal in the lower abdomen, and watch it squeal in bestial pain before taking its head.

Before he could pull the trigger, however, the human leapt into the air, swiping the glittering blades of the scissorhand through one of the chains that suspended the gantries from the high ceiling. It landed again, almost falling onto its face.

Laeveq smiled, knowing that he could not miss such a fallen target.

The room soared upwards around him as the gantry fell vertical, the chain holding it sliced through. The last things Laeveq saw were the pale, frightened upturned faces of the slaves swirling towards him through the smoke, and the violent red heat of the cauldron, before the liquid fire enveloped him.



**U**ON KLAS arrived at Kep's side. The Guardsman was just watching as the molten metal finally covered the top of the Eldar's head.

'Your heresy might be third-class,' the Commissar said, 'but you're a first-rate murderer.'

'It's what kept me alive.' Kep looked over the gantry rail, and the factory floor below. Hundreds of frightened eyes gazed back. 'So what now?'

Von Klas got to his feet. 'We start our little war. Get Rahimzadeh and Ibn and start unchaining those slaves. And send Scleros up here, we'll need his logistics. We've got an army now.'



**T**HE MOST INTOLERABLE thing of all, thought Kypselon, was that he could see it from his own throne room. The beautiful cold temple of bone, the icon of perfection which would place the seal of immortality on his long and brutal life, now stained by the presence of two thousand barbaric aliens.

'How long have they occupied it?' he asked, his voice quiet and low, as it always was when Kypselon was at his most wrathful, and thus his most dangerous.

Exuma's eyes unclouded slightly. 'Since the turning of the second sun,' he replied. 'Attacked the temple and slaughtered the garrison. Some of them will be armed by now, they had quite an armoury there. It's your human all right. It must have recruited the slaves when it took over Laeveq's

factory a few hours ago. Remember Laeveq? Bright boy.'

Kypselon waved a hand brusquely and the great window dimmed into shadow. He turned, his dark purple robes sweeping out behind him, and strode into the centre of the throne room. The eyes of his elite warriors followed his every move. He raised his arms as he spoke, his voice deep and resonant with hate.

'To your strike craft, my children!' he howled. 'This is an insult to you as it is to me. There will be no animals defiling my temple. There will be no barbarian aliens defying our natural dominion! Take up arms and we shall revel in the blood of slaves!'

The Warriors held up their weapons and screamed. Their keening war cry drifted through the palace and out into Commoragh, echoing across the night-marish spires, through the evil air.



FROM WITHIN, the temple was a vast hollowed carcass, bleached white, monstrous vertebrae spanning the ceiling, an altar of skulls the size of a command bunker towering above them all. The slaves crouched behind the barricades they had made from the shattered architectural debris of Commoragh, fragments of broken arches, bouquets of iron spikes. Those that were armed had their rifles and pistols pointed at the horizon – those that were not found themselves jagged shards of metal or heavy bars to fight with at closer quarters.

Rahimzadeh and Kep were in the front line, the slaves formed up around them. It occurred to von Klas that the wasted, broken slaves were the first command the Guardsmen had ever had. Near the altar, Ibn was organising those slaves who seemed the strongest, the ones who had been given the few heavy weapons they had found.

'How many do we have?' Commissar von Klas asked of Scleros.

'Eighteen hundred. Of two thousand we attacked with.'

'Armed?'

'Seven hundred.' Scleros seemed unmoved by the information.

Von Klas looked between the pillars at the churning sky. He saw something, vague flitting black spots like flies. He had seen them before, untold millions of miles away, on an insignificant moon of Hydraphur. They were devastating Eldar attack craft: Raiders.



'**O ALIEN MUST LIVE.** Bring me the head of the man-scum who dared defy my will.' Kypselon gave his order in a stern, quiet voice, knowing it would be transmitted into the very consciousness of every Eldar under his control.

His ornate strike craft touched down and all around him flowed a tide of his followers, a wave that crashed against the makeshift barricades and swept over them. The first were absorbed by the slaves, those that were armed keeping low against their barricades and pouring splinter fire into their foes. Warriors fell broken to the floor, a hundred at a stroke, but they could be replaced.

From within the depths of the front lines a horde of slaves armed with little save fear and anger poured out. They were led by a shaven-headed maniac with a splinter pistol in each hand, the fury in its eyes infecting the slaves formed up around it, who attacked with crude blades and clubs.

Yae's Wyches went to meet them, dancing gleefully between the barbarians, lashing out with their silver blades, slicing through the pale skinny bodies of the slaves. But the slaves still would not fall back, still they charged forward, even as their leader died under Yae's twin blades. Countless slaves died, slashed to pieces or riddled with splinter rounds. Heavy fire from stolen dark lances and splinter cannons scythed through the Eldar warriors, but then Yae broke through, and again the slaves' blood swirled ankle-deep on the temple floor.

Kypselon ordered his craft forward through the carnage. Before him lay only one target: the human filth who had

started it all, he of the colder heart, standing defiant by the great skull altar, still bearing the weapons he had stolen from Verredaek.

Alerting Verredaek's miserable translator slave with a cuff to the head, Kypselon landed within earshot of the human, where they could talk above the cries of the dead. The Eldar bodyguard stood aside. Kypselon spoke.

'Who are you to defy my will?' he said via the translator.

'I am Commissar von Klas, of Hydraphur,' replied the alien, almost as if he wasn't afraid. 'You may remember. When you took my command prisoner, you picked out a handful of us to kill at your leisure. Ten percent.'

Kypselon thought for a second. He was old, he had killed so many...

Then he remembered.

'Of course,' he said with a smile of pride. 'You're the one in ten.'

The human, von Klas, smiled coldly. 'No, the one in a million.'

Kypselon noticed the young one too late, the one in a dirty dark red uniform, with the web of metal across the side of his face, skulking at the foot of the altar. It pressed down a plunger on the control it was holding.

A dozen explosive charges stolen from the factory went off at once. They blasted the bases out from the pillars, sending great shards of bone shearing down from the ceiling. They crushed eldar and slave alike, and punched through the hulls of the Eldar Raiders. Only Kypselon's craft managed to dodge out between the pillars.

Half the warriors were buried as a cloud of dust rose to obscure the imploding mass of bone which had once represented Kypselon's endless career of murder and savage glory. Broken skulls rained down from a sky the colour of dead flesh.

Kypselon felt that emotion he had not felt for a very long time. The feeling that he had lost control.

'Death to men!' he hissed to anyone who could hear. 'I want no slave sullying my city! Kill them all! Every one! This disgusting species shall never again face me and live!'

**W**HEN VON KLAS awoke he was manacled to the cold metal floor of a cell. The skin on his back was raw from the lash. He was unable to focus properly; the taste of blood was in his mouth. In the minimal light he could see that his legs had been broken, and were lying out in front of him like useless twigs. He was probably dying. But had he won? He drifted into unconsciousness again.

Days or weeks later, he could no longer tell, the cell door was opened and another two prisoners were thrown in. One was human, a girl, with straggly hair that had once been blonde, who crawled like a beaten dog.

The other was an Eldar, thin and feeble without his armour and his legions of elite guards, his eyes dull, his wrinkling skin bruised. He stared at von Klas and started with recognition. Then he spoke. The translator took up his dark sibilant language in Imperial Gothic automatically, working from an instinct that had been bored into her soul.

'I knew you had a cold heart, human,' Kypselon said, with something approaching admiration.

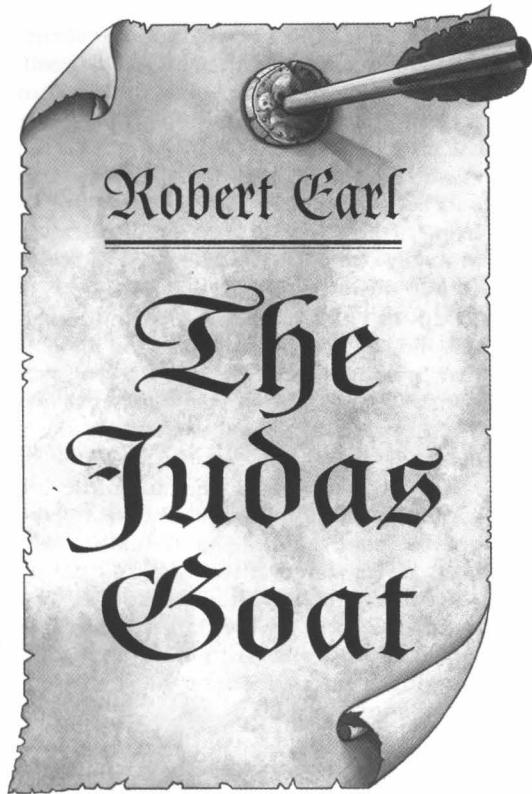
Von Klas laughed darkly, even though it hurt his raw throat. 'What was it in the end? What finished you?'

Kypselon shook his head gravely. 'Uergax. We had no slaves, we had no factories, no expendable troops. We were crippled. He had the Mandrakes, the Incubi. He carved the Broken Spine apart as if he had been born to it.' The Archon slumped to the cell floor, and von Klas saw the old Eldar's fires of ambition were out.

'Your Raiders turned up as blips on our scanners,' said the human who called himself a Commissar. 'Seventy-two hours later, the only survivor of seventeen whole platoons was me, but I had my orders. I was to eliminate any threats and a Commissar either fulfills his orders or dies. I fulfilled mine.'

He looked Kypselon deep in his unknowable alien eyes. 'We humans aren't as stupid as you Eldar believe. Remember my words, when Uergax comes to execute us both. I know I'll get a blade through the neck, like any other animal.'

'But I imagine that it will take far, far longer for *you* to die.' ●



**M**OLLENS SNARLED with surprise and leapt backwards. He tried to ignore the blood-red slash across his forearm and snatched for his knife. The hulking Reiklander advanced towards him, his own glistening blade held downwards. Mollens licked his lips nervously, more worried by the man's wide grin than the blade in his hand. What had got into him?

With a speed and grace which belied his hefty frame, the Reiklander leapt with a savage howl. Mollens twisted and struck in one fluid, thoughtless motion. For one terrible moment the two men gazed helplessly into each other's eyes, then the Reiklander collapsed into the cold mud.

Ignoring the horrified silence and the ring of shocked faces, Captain Gustav Mollens stooped and retrieved his knife from the corpse's side. Brandishing the gory weapon, he glared, white-faced, at the others.

'Anyone else?'

The recruits edged backwards. Their commander, knife still at the ready, watched them closely for any further sign of

rebellion. Only one of their number seemed unaffected by the sudden, murderous violence.

'That won't help your recruitment drive much,' he said.

Mollens was surprised into a bark of laughter by the swarthy, dark-haired man's callous indifference. 'No, I guess not,' he admitted, stooping to wipe his knife on the dead man's tunic. When he was satisfied that the blade was clean, he sheathed it and started issuing orders as though nothing untoward had occurred.

'You and you, build a pyre. We'll burn this and then make camp for the night. You four, box the compass 'till I work out a roster for guard duty. Now,' he concluded, turning back to his sardonic companion, 'what's your name, soldier?'

'Gevalt, sir. Why are you burning him?' A smirk still played across the man's lips. Mollens decided it was no wonder the man's nose had been broken, more than once by the look of it.

'Well, when I was in the southlands...' His voice trailed off. Best not to mention those whispering horrors here, with the skeletal limbs of the forest reaching out over his little band of innocents.

'Ah, zombies you mean,' Gevalt finished for him.

Well, Mollens thought, perhaps not all such innocents.

'You should tell them about the deathless ones,' Gevalt continued, gesturing casually at the rest of the band, who were by now all busy assembling tents and the fire. 'Might stop the desertions.'

Mollens regarded the man with something approaching respect. Callous and manipulative, he thought; useful traits. He's also confident enough to speak his mind, so he's not intimidated by the scars and the stories. Most of these lads are as nervous of me, as I am of...

The captain tugged his earlobe thoughtfully, then took Gevalt aside.

'I've thought of telling them something like that,' he admitted quietly. 'But start telling this bunch of clodhoppers what they're really going to have to contend with and how many do you think we'll get to Nuln? No, better to leave them to their dreams of glory and the only desertions

we'll get will be a few of the most homesick. Not that it isn't a glorious life in the Emperor's army, of course,' he added quickly, on seeing Gevalt's blank expression.

The man winked conspiratorially and smiled. 'I'm sure you're right,' he said. 'But I don't mind taking the night watches with you for a while. Perhaps if I can catch some of these rabbits before they run, I'll have more of a squad to lead when we get to Nuln. Under yourself, of course, captain.'

It was Mollens's turn to smile. He had been right to confide in this man. If nothing else, it meant he wouldn't have to sleep with one eye open every night.

'Well, Acting-Sergeant Gevalt,' he said decisively, 'I think we are agreed.'

In the gathering darkness of the night the two men shook hands, then turned back to the funeral pyre.



**M**OLLENS TWISTED irritably under his blankets. It was going to be one of those nights, he knew it. As soon as he had lain down in this relatively comfortable spot, dog-tired and with a full belly, he had started to slip into the warm embrace of sleep. But the horror was there again.

It was worse in his imagination than it had ever been in reality, he knew – but knowing didn't help. The twinned yellow fangs; the cloying, sulphurous stench of filthy fur. Worst of all were the paws, bearing incongruously nimble fingers and thumbs. When the nightmares came it was always those mutant fingers that he felt closing around his throat in the second before he jerked awake, sweating and bloodless.

And the last of his gin was gone. On nights like this it was the only escape he could find. He had grown to love the acrid smell of the clear liquid, the way it stung his gums but soothed away his fears. Most of all, he loved the rising tide of peace that the anaesthetic of raw alcohol brought. It drowned the daemons which lurked in the

tangled labyrinths of his memory with a solid, chemical efficiency that was always reliable.

Of course there was a price to pay. Mornings became monotonously painful; afternoons became increasingly thirsty. And although he cursed his Colonel for wasting him, a seasoned veteran, on these damnable recruitment marches, he knew that the alcohol was really to blame. It had driven him in to making too many mistakes, getting into too many brawls. He'd even been banned from the Reikguard's mess in Nuln, quite a feat in an Empire army barracks.

Mollens shifted again beneath his blankets and scratched listlessly. It had seemed like a good idea to ration himself to a single canteen on this trip but then he had been drunk when he'd made the decision, and now he cursed himself for a fool. Since his supply had run out he'd become irritable, flying into fits of rage at the slightest mistake by the new recruits. It was no wonder so many of them had taken the advantage of darkness and an exhausted officer to slip away, out of the noose of the Emperor's commission.

The old soldier rolled onto his side and stared at the flickering fire. Here and there one of the troops would turn beneath his rough blanket, snore or murmur through the fog of sleep. One of the men, who lay completely swathed but for his grubby pink toes, called from the depths of slumber for his mother.

Men? Be truthful, Mollens thought; they are only boys fresh from their families and farms. They don't have a clue about what they've let themselves in for. But then, neither did I. You can't afford to feel sorry for them, not in this game. Even if they might end up patrolling the sewers. Looking for rats... By Sigmar, now he would never get to sleep.



**T**HE COLD brightness of dawn found Mollens curled up and snoring. Gevalt, threading his way through the awakening camp, approached him with

a mug of tea. The sergeant shook the sleeping bulk of his commander through the grey dampness of his dew-soaked blanket, wafting the fragrant steam of the drink into his face.

Mollens sat up, a grimace on his face, and gratefully accepted the mug, clasping it between his hands like a poor man's grail. Grunting his thanks he drank greedily, smacked his lips in appreciation, then clambered stiffly to his feet.

'It's a fine morning,' Gevalt said cheerily, taking the emptied mug that Mollens handed back to him. He heard one of the officer's joints pop as he stretched; the sound reminded him of a twig snapping.

'Yes, it is a fine morning,' replied the captain, and looked suspiciously at his companion. The man seemed obscenely cheerful for this time of day. 'Did we lose any more last night?'

'Not one,' Gevalt said happily. 'Counted 'em myself. Mind you, I've been up all night. Do you suppose I could sleep during exercises this afternoon?'

Mollens grunted, exasperated more by the sudden cessation in desertions than by his new sergeant's request. There were almost forty men here. If the instinct to escape became strong enough they could always find a way to follow it past their single officer. That was how things were supposed to be – the Nuln regiments were no place for the faint-hearted – but Mollens had already lost a score a men. Quite a record. Had he really become such a bad commander?

'I'll decide after I've called the roll,' Mollens consented, turning away and bellowing the order to fall in. The roll call confirmed Gevalt's boast. The troop, although still too undisciplined to be called correct, were at least all present. Mollens smiled and turned to his sergeant.

'Well done. You can rest up this afternoon. But first we march.'

And march they did. Packs that would have driven mules to mutiny dragged the men down, turning the muscles in their backs and legs and necks into twists of agonised meat. Boots, new and unbroken, raised crops of blisters across unfamiliar soles, constantly bursting and reforming into fresh lines of pain. By the time the column had reached the next campsite in a

clearing burned from the heart of the forest, they felt as stooped and frail as their grandfathers.

Mollens watched them steaming in the frosty winter air and found himself remembering a herd of beef cattle he'd seen a month or so ago. They too had created their own warm mist of sweat and exhaustion. They too had stood with this same air of worn out passivity, seemingly grateful at being allowed to rest. It had been in a butcher's yard on the outskirts of Nuln. The recruits, some of them still panting, looked to their captain with trusting, hopeful eyes. Mollens found that the thought of cattle being led to the slaughterhouse made it strangely difficult for him to meet their collective gaze. But at least he could give them the order they must all be praying for.

'We'll stop here for the day and eat. This afternoon is spear practice,' Mollens told them, dropping his pack and biting down on the groan of relief that came to his own lips. It wouldn't do to let the men know that he was tired. Instead he posted four sentries and settled down to eat.

As he bit through the iron-hard crust of his bread, he watched the petty bartering that preceded all of their meals. Apples were swapped for bread, a measure of beer for a slice of mutton. Some of Mollens's charges still had the remnants of parcels prepared by their tearful families. The captain noticed that the owners of these were reluctant to swap now that the food was the only link they had left with their homes. He was surprised by the pang of sentimentality the thought brought, and began to plan the afternoon's drill to drown it out.

There was always something reassuringly sane about drill; if only the rest of life could be so clear cut and orderly. There had been a time not so long ago when it had been, or at least seemed to be. He had known, for instance, that Emperor Karl Franz had been fighting a just war. It was the duty of every man in the Empire to fight in the Emperor's armies. And didn't everyone know that a glorious death was infinitely preferable to a quiet life? Even the priests said so. So why, then, did bringing these farm lads in to bolster the Elector Countess of Nuln's army seem like treachery?

Perhaps, whispered his subconscious unpleasantly, it's because nobody who knows anything about the sewers would willingly go down there. You've managed to avoid it for the past five years, haven't you? After all, when you're choking on filth, cut off from the sun and buried amongst the rotting intestines of the city, there's no room for drill. Or glory. And if you believed in duty so much you wouldn't have—

'Shut up!' Mollens snapped, pulled himself from the terrible mire of this reverie. For a moment he was sure he'd spoken aloud. But a guilty glance left and right reassured him. The men were sprawled around the clearing with a languid contentment that the captain found difficult not to envy. Gods, but he needed a drink!

Instead he allowed himself one long, deep sigh then pulled himself to his feet and called them to order. 'Right! We'll spend the rest of the day learning more about our comrade the spear,' he barked, falling easily back into the familiar role of drill-master. He was pleased by the appreciative murmur that ran through the troop. They were obviously keen, even if it was only because they were tired of marching.

'As you progress through training,' he continued, 'you will be tested with halberds or bows, or perhaps even those newfangled black powder weapons. But to learn the spear is to begin to understand them all, for it was the first weapon of the Empire and it will be the last. Today, then, we will learn the rudiments of attacking, parrying and fighting in ranks. The rudiments, in other words, of war.'

The afternoon passed swiftly. Mollens enjoyed losing himself in the comforting routine of weapons instruction and the men were revitalised by their eagerness to learn. When they were split into competing pairs, the competition was fierce, much to their captain's approval. Desertions so far had been too high, but at least those that remained genuinely wanted to be warriors.

Mollens heard a sudden howl and spun to find a flushed looking youth had dropped his weapon to staunch his bleeding nose with both hands. His opponent looked away guiltily as the captain approached.

'Why have you dropped your weapon?' Mollens gently asked the injured man.

'Hurt my nose, sir,' he replied, holding out a blood-smeared hand in corroboration. The captain examined it, then stepped to one side to peer intently at his charge's profile. The youth began to blush under this merciless scrutiny, and by the time the rest of the troop had gathered around curiously his face was burning with itching self-consciousness.

'I can see why you're worried about your profile,' Mollens said at length, allowing concern to surface in his voice. 'Who'd worry about fighting with such a fine bone structure to protect?'

A ripple of nervous laughter spread through the ranks like a breeze through corn. Without the slightest warning Mollens's hand scythed through it, to slam into the injured man's nose. It broke with a grisly snap of crushed cartilage and the youth stumbled backwards. Mollens followed him, a cold light burning in his eyes.

'Never drop your weapon!' he hissed, but resisted the temptation to strike the recruit again. The boy, deathly pale apart from the rivulet of fresh blood which streamed from his nose, nodded mutely. Mollens glared ferociously at him, then realised that his charge was fighting back tears. His anger evaporated in a sudden wash of self-reproach.

'I'm sorry I had to do that,' he said, trying not to sound defensive. 'But if you lose your weapon in combat you're dead. And your comrades won't be far behind you. Understand? Never allow yourself to be disarmed.'

'What if your weapons break?' The questioner, thick-set and heavy browed, had moved to stand beside his bleeding comrade, the offer of support evident in his stance and voice. Mollens was taken aback by the recruit's tone, but the professional in him was pleased to hear it. *Esprit de corps* was always preferable to blind obedience. Even so, he stared angrily at the youth, pretending annoyance at the interruption.

'You find another one,' the captain replied, waiting until the questioner could no longer hold his gaze. 'Even if it's just a club or a rock. Any weapon is better than none. Now, back to practice. We've only an hour of light, so let's make the most of it.'

**M**ED-EYED AND crawling with the fidgets, Mollens gave up on his attempt to sleep. He had learned long ago that it was no use trying to force it. Against the hot and cold claws of insomnia, even mindless self-discipline was useless. Against the horrors of the past, though, it sometimes worked.

Again and again he forcibly dragged his mind's eye away from images of that last, lethal patrol. He tried not to think about the hungry sucking sound the rats had made when they had buried their fangs into Muller. He ignored the desperate chorus of screams that had rung out beneath the tranquil streets of Nuln five miserable years ago, screams that still echoed within the tortured confines of his dreams.

But as soon as he had blanked that memory another, even worse, jostled into its place. This time it was of Ferdinand staggering along behind him as they fled towards the exit. Even in the pathetically inadequate light of the guttering lamp, Mollens could see the flaps of shredded skin that hung obscenely down from his ruined body like torn rags. Behind them, echoing and multiplying in the cold brick tube of the sewer, came the sounds of the pursuing foe. The rattle of sharp claws against stone, the sliding tidal hiss of packed furry bodies, the occasional muffled squeak. At every step the sound came closer. They had almost made it back to the surface, could even smell the freshness of night air, when Ferdinand had stopped. The last of Mollens's comrades, the most loyal of his friends, listened to the enemies' quickening approach with his head to one side in a familiar, curiously childish gesture. Then he had looked to Mollens, his face unreadable through the mask of pain and blood, and nodded.

And Mollens, Sigmar help him, had nodded back and ran on. The next patrol hadn't even found Ferdinand's bones.

Mollens gazed upwards at the stars, then past them into the chilled depths of the void. As always the memory of that last betrayal seemed to empty him of everything but a deep, aching tiredness. Perhaps that, combined with his inability to sleep, was Sigmar's way of punishing his cowardice.

The staccato sound of a cracking twig startled Mollens, pulling him out of his self-

pity. He lay still, eyes straining against the darkness, until he saw a familiar swarthy shadow detach itself, bat-like, from a tree and steal away into the night.

Cautiously Mollens slid out from beneath his blankets and pulled on his boots. A quick glance around the camp perimeter told him all he needed to know. Gevalt was nowhere to be seen. So much for him catching rabbits.

Mollens stalked quietly through the camp, seething with an anger fuelled by insomnia. He felt betrayed, and foolish for it. As he slunk into the darkness he loosened his knife in its scabbard. He would cut this particular deserter a smile that would serve as an example to the rest. Things had been sliding too far out of control lately and for tonight, at least, he had found someone to blame.

Under the dark canopy of the forest the captain stopped and waited for his night vision to come. He'd catch Gevalt eventually. No point walking into a trap; the bastard was certainly cunning enough for it. Despite the delay there was no chance of him losing his prey. Whatever Gevalt had been, he was no woodsman. In front of him Mollens heard a dull thump followed by a muffled curse. With a wolfish grin playing about his scarred features he stooped and scurried forward on fingers and toes well versed in the arts of silence and stealth.

The stumbling Gevalt was almost within striking distance when Mollens, his senses amplified tenfold by this familiar game, froze. A few yards ahead there was a faint, hardly noticeable green glow, and as Mollens waiting on rigid, frozen limbs he caught the smell. It reminded him of Nuln and its ancient catacombs, and the sickening horror that lurked within that nightmare underworld. It reminded him of the rats. Sweat started to trickle lazily over his cold, tingling skin. Blood hissed and pounded in his ears, racing to the wild beat of his heart. In the darkness he waited, alone with his terror.

'You came. Why? Speak-speak!' squeaked a voice from the darkness. Mollens almost screamed before he realised that it was Gevalt and not himself who was being addressed.

'My lord,' Gevalt whined. 'I am here only to serve you. I have an idea, probably

worthless it is true, but I thought I should give it to you as I give everything to you.'

A bubbling, squeaking laugh cut through the night. 'Everything but the gold, yes? So, speak, man-thing, or I feed my pet.'

A flash of sickly green fire bloomed and its ghastly light confirmed the worst of Mollens's suspicions. This was his nightmare, tearing through into the waking world to finally claim him just as it had claimed Ferdinand, Muller and the rest, those five years ago.

A bundle of dark and filthy rags lurked under the burning staff. From amidst this shambling heap protruded a long, whiskered snout. Its obscene pink tip wrinkled and twisted back and forth, gleaming in the corrupted light. From beneath the decaying cloth, hidden from Gevalt, a revolting hairless tail writhed around the haft of a knife, its crescent blade glistening beneath a coating of pale, treachery fluid. This hideous apparition, though, was nothing compared to the monstrous form which stood silently behind it.

The thing stood at least eight feet tall from black taloned feet to ragged ears. The guttering flare its master held aloft threw its twisted features into sharp relief. The slimy razors of its fangs, the corded muscles which twitched beneath its lice-ridden pelt, the vicious spikes and filthy pits that encrusted its rusting armour – all were picked out and magnified by the green light.

'My liege,' Gevalt grovelled, his whimpering tones pulling Mollens from out of his trance, 'I can bring you the whole pack of slaves' now, instead of just one or two of the most foolish here and there. When I kill the leader—'

An angry squeal cut across Gevalt's words, shocking him into silence.

'Stupid! What do you think will happen when all manthings disappear?'

'Yes, of course, you're right, master,' the traitor gulped, trying a wide, toothy, placating grin. It was almost the death of him.

In a confused explosion of movement the scaly tail whipped forward, the blade a blur in the shadows. Before Gevalt had time to even register the movement, the tip came to rest on the soft skin of his throat.

'So, it shows its teeth, does it? I'll show its filthy liver!'

'Please, master...' Gevalt whispered. 'I didn't... Let me live... to help you.'

The cloaked figure bubbled and hissed again. Laughter, thought Mollens; that's laughter.

'Once more you will send a slave, yes? Tomorrow.'

Before his trembling servant could reply, the rat-man brandished its flaming staff. There was a blinding, too-bright flash of luminescence. Then there was nothing but total darkness and gruesome after-images cavorting across Mollens's eyes.

He waited for an age, as still as a corpse in the cold dampness, his blood whispering terrifying echoes in his ears. Eventually the dark edges of the trees and the pale glimmer of distant stars reappeared and he could hear nothing except the breeze curling through the branches above him and the occasional rustling of some small beast.

Then he heard Gevalt: a pitiful sob, followed by a low moan of private agony. For one fleeting moment the captain felt a twinge of pity for the miserable wretch. Then he remembered all the 'deserters' and felt his heart close in a convulsion of rage. Gevalt stumbled away into the night. After a few thoughtful moments Mollens stood and strode soundlessly back the way he had come.



**C**APTAIN, where have you been?' Gevalt asked from his seat beside the campfire, as Mollens strolled back. If he noticed his new sergeant's strained tone, or the vein that pulsed a warning in his forehead, Mollens gave no sign of it.

'Just watering the trees,' Mollens said with a manufactured smile. 'You can turn in now; I'll not be able to get back to sleep.'

'Thank you, sir,' Gevalt croaked and stumbled towards his blankets.

Mollens watched him go, then stirred the dying embers of the fire back into life. He fetched his cloak, wrapped it around his shoulders and sat staring into the flames.

A few hours later and the troop was ready to move off. It was another crisp dawn, made all the more refreshing by the optimistic chatter of the woodland birds. Under the blue vault of the sky the dew sparkled on the verdant sweeps of the forest. Mollens breathed in the smell of sap in the clear, cool breeze. He almost believed that last night must just have been a nightmare. Gevalt, for one, looked like a man without a care in the world as he shouldered his pack and started the first of the day's marching songs. But as the column stamped off along the narrow woodland track the captain realised that he was trying to deceive himself about the night's events. He had seen what he had seen, and to try to deny it would be little more than a slow form of suicide.

Your speciality, gloated his subconscious, but the captain ignored the voice and examined his plan for the tenth time.

After six hours of strenuous marching they reached a wide, undulating meadow. The troop crunched doggedly through the yellow remains of winter wheat that stubbled the field, stumbling into each other when they crossed the occasional barren slick of mud, before Mollens called the day's halt.

Perhaps the relieved joy the men felt at this decision was contagious, or perhaps it was the quickening pulse of the forest in early spring, but for some reason the captain felt almost happy. The afternoons spear practice buoyed his spirits even more. His men displayed a remarkable aptitude for the weapon, their nerves and sinews already half trained by shovels and pitchforks and from the occasional hunt.

Mollens prowled around the practice ring, barking a warning here or bestowing a word of praise there. By the time the cooks had prepared the evening's communal meal he had begun to realise that many of his recruits had more to offer than he had thought.

They were fitter than the usual gutter-scum the Nuln sewer guard took, certainly. But more than that, they were possessed of a certain straightforward savagery that the soldier in Mollens delighted in. Many of these men, he sensed, had joined up not to escape from the gallows or poverty, but because they were keen to fight. For some

reason the notion gave him a peculiar floating sensation. It felt as if a weight, carried for so long as to be almost a part of him, had sloughed off.

Gevalt, meanwhile, had appeared calm and cheerful all day, his mask not slipping for a moment. Mollens hated him all the more for it. He had kept one eye on the traitor ever since last night and had twice almost surrendered to the urge to kill the man, to smash him down and finish him there and then. But he knew that even his rank would not allow him to act without real evidence.

As the campfire smoked and crackled, Mollens stretched out on his back, by turn first tensing and then relaxing his various muscle groups. It was an old campaign trick, one of a hundred he knew he should have been teaching his charges over the past weeks instead of wallowing in self pity. Still, he would have plenty of time to make good his negligence when they got to Nuln. Sigmar willing.

He savoured the smell of wood-smoke, and the rich aroma of boiling meat and vegetables. Above him the stars started to appear, shining in anticipation of their nightly dance, and the last pink rind of sunlight faded away from the western horizon. As the world spun away into darkness Mollens was surprised that for the first time in an age he felt totally relaxed. It had always been thus in the heart of a battle, when all that could be done had been done and his fate was in the hands of the Gods. How long, he wondered, since he had felt this? How long since he had been so at peace?

It wasn't until the sleeping blankets were laid out that Gevalt finally approached him. A ball of hatred tried to claw itself up from the pit of Mollens stomach, but even that couldn't totally destroy his new found sense of peace.

'Thank you for concluding my watch last night,' Gevalt said with an easy grin. 'If you want to turn in, I'll return the favour.'

'Don't mind if I do,' Mollens replied, trying to sound genuine. 'You seem to be able to stop the rabbits running, sergeant. When we reach Nuln I'll certainly tell the colonel of it.'

Gevalt bowed slightly, seeming pleased. 'I'll turn in then. Wake me up before the

rest, won't you?" Mollens, feeling the heat of his anger beginning to burn through his friendly façade despite his best intentions, hastily buried himself beneath the blankets.

It was a long, tense night. Much to his chagrin Mollens found that the insomnia that had tormented him for so long chose this, of all nights, to depart. Throughout the monotonous hours of the watch he kept from beneath his blankets sleep waited, a hungry predator waiting in ambush. As time crawled past he dozed, sometimes for frighteningly indeterminate periods, before waking with a jolt. Every time he jerked back to his senses, a feeling of doom washed through him, but each time it was dispelled by the sight of Gevalt sitting cross-legged and watchful near the trees.

Strange how circumstances could make such a loathsome, dangerous man a source of comfort. In Bretonnia, Mollens's first campaign, the laughter of the enemy archers across the fields had also soothed him. While they had laughed, their bowstrings had been silent, and that was a thought to bring warmth to any soldier of the Emperor in those days. They were a colourful foe, the Bretonnians; in his mind he could see their bright tunics, shining armour, flowing banners. From amidst a sea of them Mollens, with mild surprise, picked out the face of old Ferdinand. He laughed at the sight of his dead friend's face, the familiar lines and furrows that marked it like duelling scars were twisting into a warm, forgiving smile. How different from the last time he had looked, down in the sewers. With the rats. The ambush. The blood stained teeth and claws reaching out for him—

Mollens awoke, gasping from the horror of the images. He looked frantically around for Gevalt and felt a rush of relief when he saw the man sitting spider-like barely a dozen paces away. Then he noticed a second figure sitting beside the traitor, and relief became anticipation.

Mollens, his eyes still at ground level, couldn't tell which of the troop it was. As he watched Gevalt passed a flask to his companion, metal glowing with a dull, blood coloured sheen in the firelight. In the moment before the lad raised it to his grateful lips Mollens felt that he must

surely lose control. What a relief it would be to spring up, knock the poisoned cup away from the recruit's mouth, and finish Gevalt. Not in anger or vengeance but just quickly, the way one would kill a scorpion.

But the moment passed. Mollens watched the flask tilt upwards. One gulp was enough. The flask clanked as it hit the ground, loosened by a spasm which shook the victim's fingers. The lad sat stiff and trembling as Gevalt, his face a gargoyle's mask of watchful cunning, leaned forwards and whispered an indiscernible suggestion to his prey. The lad groaned faintly, then began to hoist himself off the ground.

Mollens rose wraithlike from his bed and stalked towards the two men. Not until the drugged victim of Gevalt's treachery took his first lurching step towards the south did the captain speak.

'Evening, sergeant. Where's he off to?'

Gevalt sprang to his feet, face white, and reached instinctively for his dagger. Just in time he remembered himself and forced his pale features into a ghastly smile.

'Going for firewood, sir,' he managed. Mollens noted the sudden sheen of sweat that bathed the man's face and the hand which hovered uncertainly by the hilt of his knife.

'No need. I've decided that we could use some night exercises. Let the troops know that the glory of serving the Emperor doesn't stop at dinnertime, eh?' His savage smile was genuine enough now. Let him guess that I know, he thought. Let him try to silence me.

For a moment Gevalt's features were twisted in fearful indecision. In the end, much to Mollens's disappointment, he chose to continue his bluff.

'You, lad,' the man said, placing a hand on the recruit's twitching shoulder. 'You heard the captain. Go and wake the troop.'

As the lad turned back towards the campfire, Mollens noted his wide pupils and the peculiar tautness of the muscles in his face. He remembered the young Reiklander, now nothing more than ash in the woods, and made a sudden decision. The time for bluff and silence was past, but he wouldn't cheat the inquisitors in Nuln of their vile pleasures by taking his own vengeance now.

When the last of the recruits was roused to stand groggily with the rest of his fellows, Mollens gestured at Gevalt, who stood hovering by his side, and spoke.

'You have no uniforms and scant enough training but tonight you will become soldiers of our great Emperor. You will face many dangers in the years to come, from steel to disease, but always the most lethal will be the traitorous knife in the back. This man, your sergeant—'

He got no further. Gevalt had been listening to his words in an agony of apprehension and now his control snapped. With a piercing cry he leapt towards his captain with open jaws, forgetting even his knife in his terror. Mollens, surprised, managed to lift his forearm in time to keep the teeth from his throat, but Gevalt bit down into the flesh with shocking strength.

The captain screamed as he felt his muscles tearing. Instinctively he fell back beneath the momentum of his enemy's charge, twisting as he fell in order to trap Gevalt beneath him. He grabbed for his knife and felt a flare of horror when his groping fingers clutched Gevalt's fist, already clasped around the hilt. With a vicious tug Gevalt freed the blade and Mollens screamed again as his palm was sliced open.

Wounded or not he caught his enemy's wrist in a bloody grip. The agony of his split hand paled beside that flaring along his arm as Gevalt's jaws closed tighter, releasing a stream of blood. Mollens raised his head to look into the traitor's frenzied eyes, then snapped his forehead down onto his crooked nose. There was a satisfying crack, but before he could repeat the manoeuvre he felt fingers closing around his throat. He twisted and struggled away from the lethal grip, but it was no use. Gevalt hung onto him with a cold, iron tenacity that was born of complete desperation.

His strength bled away as a red veil fell across the captain's vision. He could feel himself starting to fade, even the passions of rage and fear that had burned so brightly within his chest withering away, smothered by the cold ashes of frustration and apathy. Eyes dimming, Mollens could

see the ring of worried faces gathered around them, confused and afraid.

Poor sods, he thought regretfully. Suppose they never stood a chance. It was his last thought before the darkness reached out to claim him.



**H**E AWOKE with a splutter, choking from the water somebody was pouring down his throat. The broad, heavy browed face that hovered above him broke into a wide, gap toothed grin, dispelling any illusion that it was one of Sigmar's angels.

'Captain, praise be you're all right,' the recruit said. His companions pushed closer, but he shoved them back impatiently. Gradually the spinning world slowed down enough for Mollens to sit up, his aching eyes searching for Gevalt.

'Where is he?' he asked the youth thickly, his throat still bruised and aching.

'We tied him up over there,' came the reply. 'He kept screaming and trying to bite us, then he tried to get us to sup some potion. Shall we kill him?'

Mollens smiled wearily at the lad's enthusiasm. He remembered him now from the previous days weapons training. He'd been the one to stand up for his comrade.

'Time enough for that, soldier. How long have I been out?'

'Only a few moments, captain. We could have taken the daemon sooner but we were waiting for your order.'

'Which of you took the decision?'

'I did, sir. Rifka Henning,' the youth said, holding out his hand and grinning in pride.

'Congratulations on your promotion, Acting-Sergeant Henning.' Mollens took his hand and grinned back. 'Now show me the traitor.'

He followed the man through the cluster of recruits and immediately saw Gevalt. His captors hadn't taken any chances. He lay awkwardly against a tree trunk, his wrists tied painfully behind it. His legs were bound by another coil of rope and a

noose had been tied around his scrawny neck, the free end hanging over a branch, ready for use.

Mollens noted the cuts and bruises that covered the traitor's body with some satisfaction, then he looked at the man's tormented face and realised that he was suffering a pain far worse than the physical. Once more the captain felt a wave of unwonted compassion for the agonised soul in front of him. But, well, the wretch was no longer his problem. Best leave him to the authorities.

Mollens turned back to his troop and stood for a moment gazing silently into their young, fearful faces. He gathered his thoughts for a moment before speaking.

'Gevalt was no daemon, just a traitor. Have you heard of the skaven, the rat-men?' He could tell by their expressions that some of them had. 'Well, he has been selling you to them. The deserters weren't cowards. They were drugged and sent to their deaths... or worse.'

He could see the fear and horror sweeping through them now, uniting them in the face of the common enemy. Then, to his relief, he saw anger take its place. A few of them started purposefully towards Gevalt. The captain waved them back.

'He's just their pawn. Tonight we'll catch the real monsters. I'll walk into their trap. You will follow me, silently. When you hear my call, charge towards the sound, keeping together at all times. Sergeant Henning here will be in charge until you rejoin me. It's a simple plan – which means it will work. Any questions?'

There were none. After just a moment's hesitation, Henning plucked a spear from the stack and one by one the others followed his example. Even thus armed they huddled close together, peering uncertainly into the darkness of the forest or back towards their captain.

How easy it would be not to do this, thought Mollens, how easy to just close ranks and head back to Nuln. Who would blame me? The troop certainly wouldn't. The Colonel wouldn't. Sykes at the tavern wouldn't as he poured one measure, then another, and another –

Abruptly, without fully realising what he was doing, Mollens started off towards the treeline.

'Give me five minutes, then follow,' he told Henning as he passed. 'Remember, don't throw your spears.'

'Sir.' Henning saluted. Mollens was warmed a little by the respect he saw in his troops' eyes. But as the firelight faded behind him and he continued striding forward into the night the warmth faded, extinguished by the tide of dread that poured relentlessly through him. He could feel it eating away at his resolve like storm waters against a dam. A weird feeling of unreality washed through him. He couldn't quite believe that he was doing this. The cold sweat that poured off him threatened to spoil the comforting grip he had on the haft of his spear. The tightly clamped muscles in his jaws spasmed uncontrollably, and he had to bite down to stop his teeth from chattering. All the while his unwilling legs carried him further into the forest.

Eventually the terror started to fade. He had been walking for a long time and there was still no sign of the enemy. Surely they would have taken him by now if they had been going to. Perhaps they had spied on the camp and fled, or maybe they had been driven off by some other terrible beast.

In spite of himself the captain began to feel a cautious relief. He stopped for a moment and listened. Hearing only the soft background patter of the woods he began to smile, then turned and started back.

A swathe of sickly green light burst through the darkness. The captain sobbed at the horrible tableau it revealed, and for a moment he stood, paralysed with horror, at the sight in front of him.

The giant rat-thing stood a scant five paces in front of him, lips drawn back in a foam-flecked snarl. It was hunched forward, tail whipping the ground behind it impatiently, its beady red eyes skewering Mollens with blind animal hatred. Skulking beside the hulking form of the beast was its vile master. It let out a shrill squeak and from the shadows amongst the trees half a dozen figures lurched forwards in response.

They were foul. In gait and appearance they were like zombies, the slack grey flesh, the untended wounds. Mollens had

seen their like before. But the things that came crashing towards him now were no zombies. Their eyes reflected a mute pleading for release that was all too human. As they came for him Mollens recognised the deserters.

These were the boys which he had lured from their mothers and sweethearts. They had left their safe, comfortable lives for dreams, chasing the mirage of glory that Mollens had helped to create. And this was where it had led them. As their fingers reached towards him, Mollens found that his throat was locked too tight to scream.

His mind reeling, the captain found odd details in his last few moments standing out with a bright, unreal clarity. He noticed every chip and crack on the nearest of the creatures' shattered fingernails. He noticed the shift of the breeze, picking up now. Then he noticed an amulet hung around the neck of one of the things, and remembered the wizened old crone who had put it around the neck of her grandson. It had been such a touching gesture of hopeless, naïve faith that Mollens had felt awful as he had led the boy away – to this.

The bitter memory became a spark, a light amidst the utter, despairing darkness of his soul. And the spark ignited a white hot ball of pure hatred in Mollens's chest. It burned with a maddening intensity, fed as it was by fear and loss, and five long tormented years. With a keening, inhuman scream Mollens sprang through the feeble forms of his lost men towards the rat-ogre before him.

The beast loomed above him, its foul reek an almost physical armour. But Mollens was unstoppable. The rat-ogre's expression changed from hatred to dumb surprise as Mollens's spear-tip smashed through its throat and out of the back of its skull in a spray of blood. Taloned hands reached upwards to grasp the haft of the spear as the monster toppled backwards into the decaying litter of the forest floor.

A piercing shriek cut through the noise of its fall, and from the corner of his eye Mollens saw a bundle of darkness and steel launch itself at him. He grabbed for his knife with a snarl and stepped back, only to trip over the huge, twitching body of the skaven's beast. A paroxysm of rage

seized him, and within its grip he forgot the most basic rule of all. He threw his knife.

The blade spun through the night, sparkling with flashes and whorls of light as it flew towards the bounding shape of the enemy. But the creature twisted sideways, cast aside its cowl, and leapt eagerly forwards towards its prone adversary. The flame from its burning staff streamed forwards now into a sharp fang of fire, its light gleaming on the poisoned dagger held in its tail.

Mollens struggled across the verminous body, ignoring the lice that swarmed beneath his fingers, and reached for his spear. He grasped the haft but his hands, slick with blood and sweat, slipped as he tugged at it. With a moan he glanced back and saw the rat-thing, its lips drawn back in a gleeful grimace, preparing to strike. There was a savage flare of blinding light, then darkness.

He lay tense, waiting for the blow to fall. But instead of the agonising bite of cold steel it was a shove, followed by a muffled curse, that sent Mollens leaping backwards. Sparks started striking around him like fireflies in the darkness, then a dozen torches burst into life. The captain bathed in their yellow glow until a hand reached down and he gratefully allowed a pair of troopers to help him to his feet. They stared past him, awe-struck by the monstrous corpse at their feet. Their spears stuck it again and again, until it lay still. One of them ventured to kick it, then sprang away in shock as a cry rang out behind him.

Sergeant Henning stood reluctantly in front of the cowering troop, his spear wavering uncertainly before him. A dozen slumped figures took step after uncertain step towards him as he backed away. Torch light flickered across their wasted features, leaving dark caverns of night in hollow cheeks and between protruding bones. One of the shambling horrors gave a low rasping moan as it reached forwards.

Mollens, moving quickly, was there to meet its clammy grip with his own. He held the creature's withered hand still and gazed into the gleams of light that were reflected back from its sunken eyes. Not daring to turn, the captain barked the

order to Henning to take the troop back to the camp.

In the darkness they left behind, a dagger glittered in the pale moonlight. It lashed out once, twice, a dozen times. The one remaining figure stood stooped over the bodies for several long moments, then forced himself to turn and follow his fellows. The sound of his boots faded away, and soon there was nothing left in the clearing but for the keening of the wind.



**M**HEN MOLLENS, red eyed and numb, returned to the camp, he found the troop gathered around Gevalt's lifeless form. He pushed his way through the silent huddle and felt his stomach turn at the sight of the traitor's butchered remains.

'It wasn't us, sir,' Henning blurted, worried by his captain's expression.

'I know,' Mollens said, his eyes glued to the body. Here and there jagged pink shards of bone, splintered like twigs during the traitor's final convulsions, had torn through frail parchment skin. Worse was the face, a frozen mask of agony. The eyes, as pink and blind as a new-born rat's, stared wildly into the great beyond. Blood had cascaded from the mouth in a great stream, the gore flecked with shreds of cheek and tongue. And, most horribly of all, the man had died with an almost gleeful rictus grin spread across his twisted features.

'I know,' repeated Mollens to himself. He knew that the will, let alone the ability, to do this to a man was far beyond the capability of these farm lads. No, he told himself, not farm lads. Not any more.

'Wrap him in a blanket. We'd better take him with us.'

'Yes, sir... erm, captain? What's that?'

Mollens glanced down at the makeshift sack he carried in his left hand. The folded cloak was already dripping with dark crimson fluid. He hefted it in his hand and smiled, suddenly proud of himself and his men.

'It's our first trophy. Look.' Out of the bag he spilled the head of the rat-ogre. It rolled onto its side, dead eyes glaring accusingly at them.

'It's horrible,' Henning said vaguely. Then he grinned, wonder writ large across his broad features. 'And we beat it, didn't we?'

'We certainly did,' Mollens nodded. He watched his men, studied their faces. He saw fear and horrified fascination warring for ascendancy across their young features, and then the sudden joyous rush of victory hit them. A moment later the cheering started.



**S**OUR DAYS LATER, they reached the final camp outside the walls of Nuln. Mollens, yawning contentedly after another sound night's sleep, awoke first. Leaving the slumbering camp behind him he waded through the cold, grey shoals of morning mist to the summit of the last hill.

The great ancient city lay sprawled out beneath the blanket of fog below him. From this distance it was still and silent apart from the chattering symphony of the dawn chorus, but Mollens knew that such a city never really slept. Already the farmers would be trudging along the twists and turns of the city streets with their loads of eggs or milk or apples. The dung collectors, finishing for the night, would be returning to their hovels on the outskirts, tired and hungry for breakfast. Apprentices, squinting with sleep, would be lighting fires or opening shops.

And meanwhile, in the stinking depths beneath the city there would be another sort of life, secret and poisonous. Mollens thought of the traps and the pitfalls, the claustrophobia and sudden, boiling masses of the enemy. He thought of his men, of poor Ferdinand and of five, long tormented years. Then he smiled a wolf's smile, savage and full of teeth.

It was good to be back. ●

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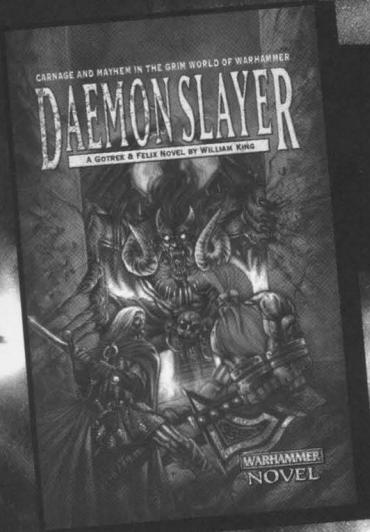
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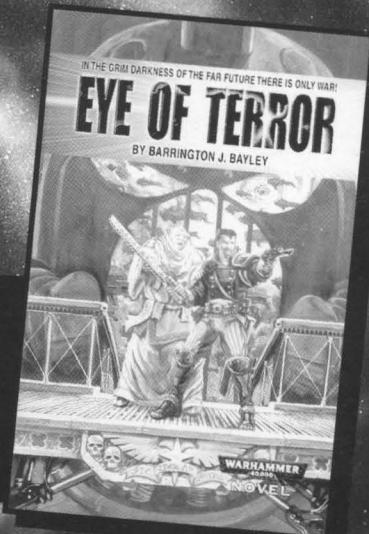
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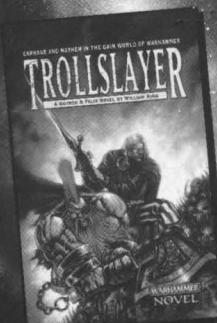
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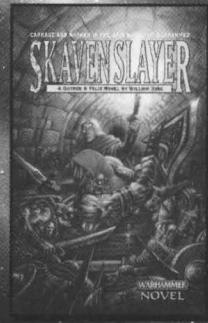
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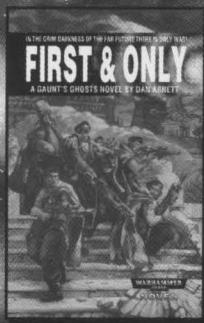
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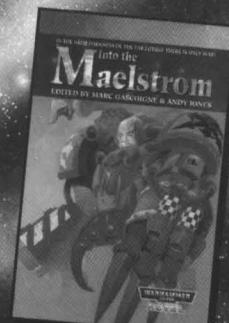
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### Black Gold, by Dan Abnett

The Chaos Marine comes on them from the rear, grabbing Raphon from behind with great armoured limbs. It drives a barbed and rusted spike through his left hip. Priad turns and dives into them, so that the three sprawl, locked, armour grinding and scraping together. The Tusk is huge, ancient armour black and shiny like a great scarab, dressed with filthy loops of chain. Priad twists, fighting to get his bolter close to the vile thing's face. He fires twice, the point blank shots shattering the Tusk's helmet and skull and igniting its power pack.

### A Gentleman's War, by Neil Rutledge

*Otto stood proud, sweeping the path with his eyes. The Bretonnian knight was just down the track. He reined in, his hatchet face looking startled. A blur of movement to one side caught Otto's eye. Just in time he ducked, and a crossbow bolt hissed past him. The guide, still holding the bow, swept out his sword with his free hand and charged at him. Otto struggled to draw his own blade. The knight was shouting something. 'They are only brigand dogs!' he yelled. 'Kill them!'*

### Hellbreak, by Ben Counter

The Wych let out a piercing shriek of pleasure as she whipped the halberd back over her shoulder, leaping high into the air and preparing to bring the blade down on the human in a shining arc. The man drove one foot into the arena's sand and thrust itself sideways, away from the shimmering blur of the Wych's limbs. The Wych somersaulted elegantly, landing on her feet and turning to face her quarry. But the human was ready too. It drove the palm of one hand into the Wych's face, splitting her nose open in a vermillion spray. The Wych rolled over in a heartbeat, caught one of the man's legs with her own and tipped it sprawling on its back. She sprang up for the kill, ready to swipe off its head with her halberd. But she was no longer holding the weapon. Her opponent was.

### The Judas Goat, by Robert Earl

*The bulking Reiklander advanced towards Mollens, his glistening blade held downwards. Mollens licked his lips nervously. With a speed and grace which belied his hefty frame, the Reiklander leapt with a savage howl. Mollens twisted and struck in one fluid, thoughtless motion. For one terrible moment the two men gazed helplessly into each other's eyes, then the Reiklander collapsed into the cold mud. Ignoring the horrified silence and the ring of shocked faces, Captain Gustav Mollens stooped and retrieved his knife. 'Anyone else?'*

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